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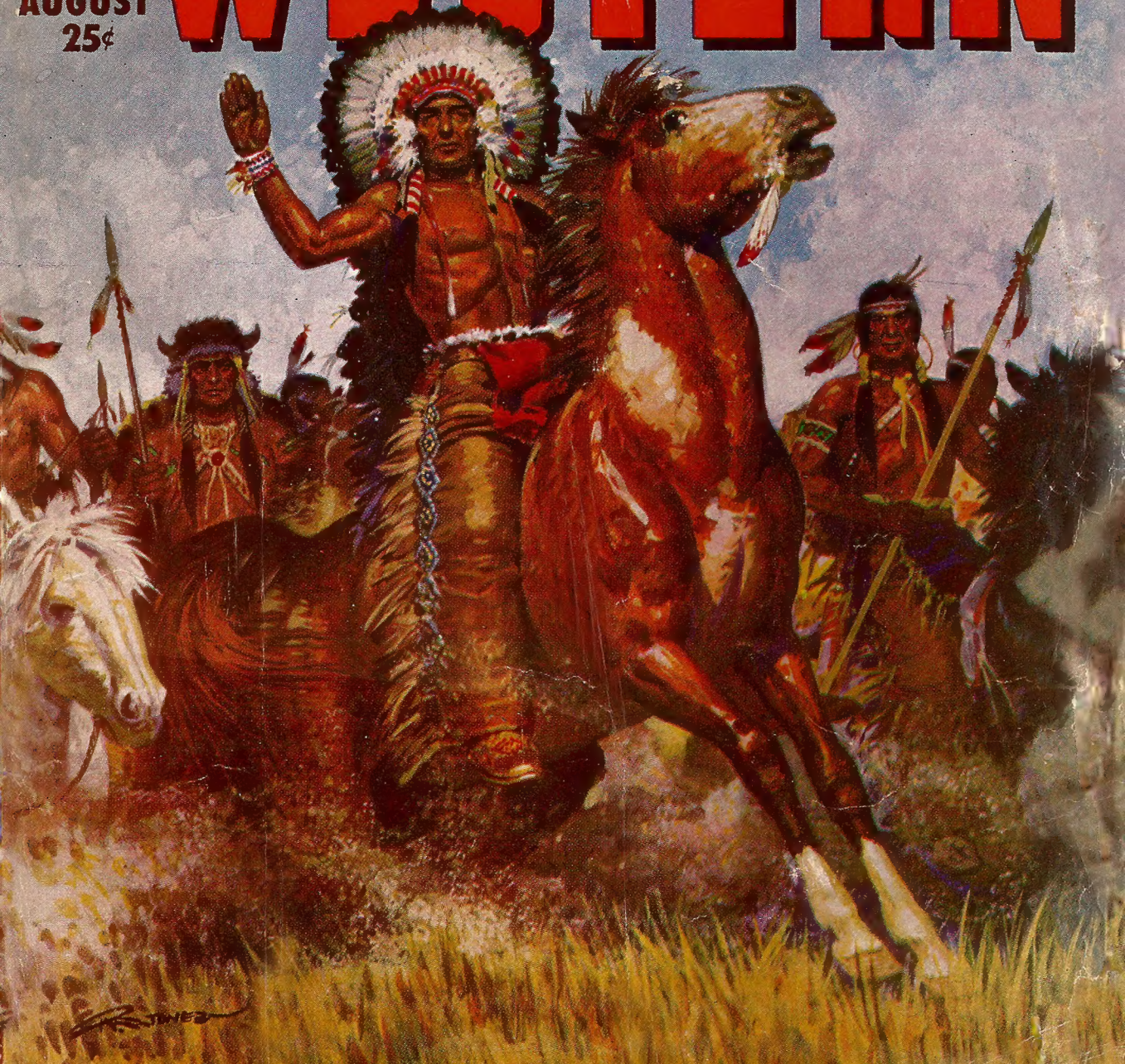

Sensational New Historical Novel

THE BROKEN LANCE by FRANK GRUBER

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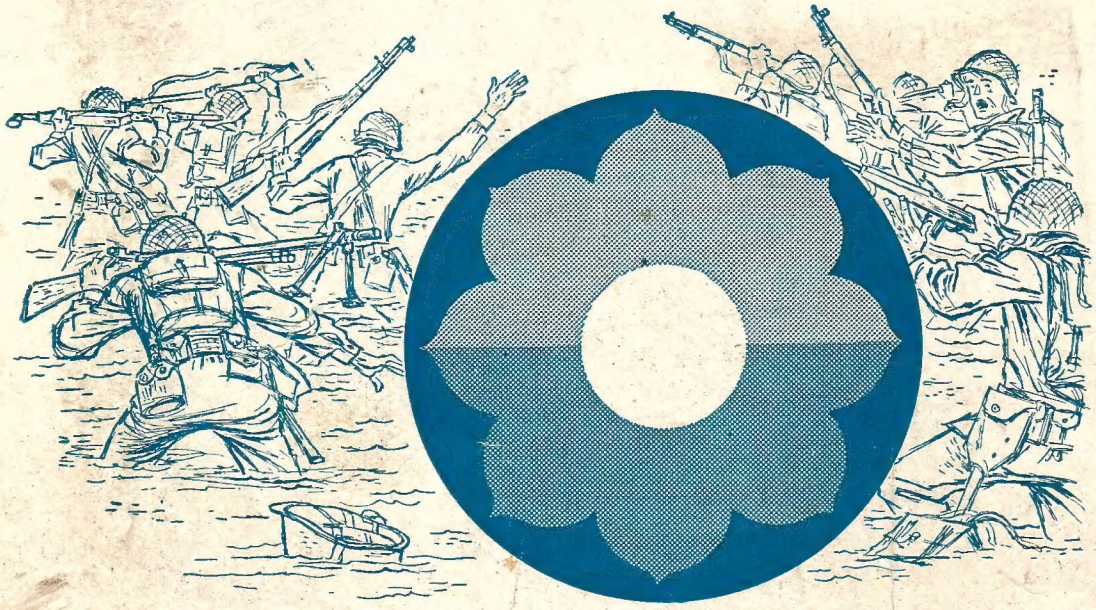

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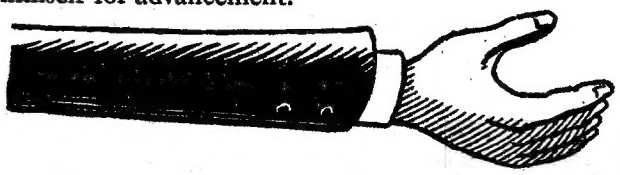

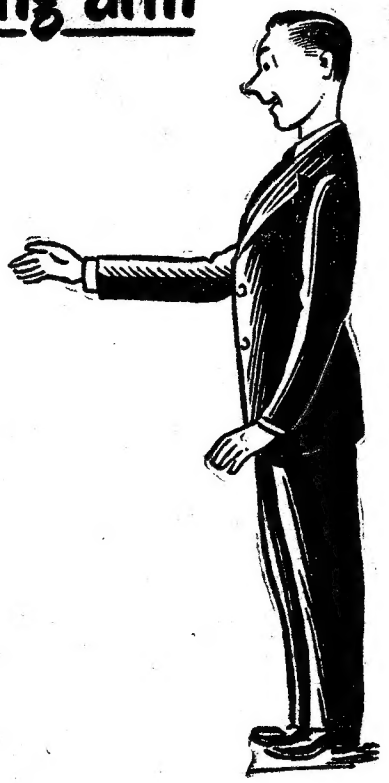

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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones illustrating a scene from "The Broken Lance."

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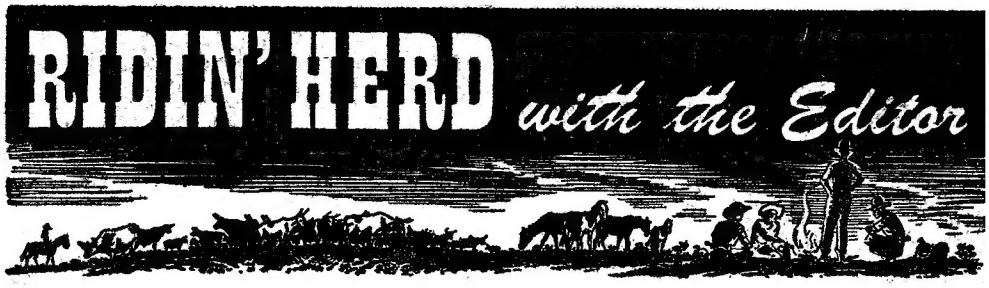

YOU'RE going to see it on the screen—but when you do, you'll have had the satisfaction of having read it first in *Mammoth Western*! The "it" we are referring to, if "it" had "it" would have made the "it" girl look like a wallflower. Which just means "it" is good. And getting around to mentioning the name of "it", "it" is "The Broken Lance" by Frank Gruber—there, didn't we say this was IT! Yup, the cover novel this month is another of those great Frank Gruber stories. And Frank did this one specially for us. We even went out to Callyforny to ast him to do it! So what's more nacheral than he also sells the story to the movies, and in book form, and heck knows where else! What more proof do you want that you are getting something really terrific this issue, and you are getting it *first!*

MIKE LUDWICK, who never wrote for us before, appears in this issue with "The Mexican Shaft." Now we're going to tell you a secret, and probably "Mike" will be mad at us, but we doubt it—but we call Mike "Granny," because that's what *she* is! And furthermore, she's up in the eighties, and still going strong. She lived all her life in the West, and has done everything from cowpunching to mining—so when you read this yarn, you should bear in mind that it's as near a factual story as is possible to get. Let's give the old gal a hand for a nice piece of work, and we hope she'll be submitting yarns to us for another eighty years!

H. B. HICKEY, who wrote that grand novel, "Saddles West" back about a year ago for us, has another short story for us in this issue. You'll like it, we know, and we recommend it. Incidentally, "Saddles West" is out now in pocketbook form, which goes to prove once more that when we run a yarn, it's a "better'n average" piece.

BACK in January, William P. McGivern had his name plastered all over the newspapers as the winner of the Red Badge Mystery Award of $1,000.00 for the best mystery novel of the year in that classification. So, since Bill is an old friend of ourn, we ast him (okay, okay, *asked* him, if you want to be grammaratical) to forget all that trivial stuff and do us a western story. And nacherly he done it! "Lazy Man" is the title of it, and you'll find it exactly what you'd expect from a prize-winning author.

ANOTHER yarn in this issue is Paul Fairman's "The Lady And The Lynch Mob." Paul's an old favorite with you readers, so there's no use blowing a horn which is already blowing so loud you can hear it clear across the country. Just set back and relax, pal, you're going to read a good one.

BY the way, we've got a little news for you readers of *Mammoth Western* who remember Howard Browne, our former managing editor. He went "west" as you may remember, to make his fortune. Well, it looks as like he's makin' it! He tells us he's just signed two contracts with Bobbs-Merrill for new mystery novels in book form. Well, Howard's been promising us a western novel for a long time, and we'll keep after him, because when he does it, we'll have another one to slam at you with all the high praise in the world.

TO close this column with nonsensical note number ninety-nine, your editor has finally succeeded in sprouting an avocado seed in his office, and the darn thing is already three feet high and headin' for the roof like mad! Say, when do them darn things begin to give with avocadoes? Maybe we started something we'll wish we hadn't!

—*Rap.*

THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

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TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

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The BROKEN LANCE

by Frank Gruber

The Indian threw the tomahawk with a defiant gesture. It hurtled through the air and the trooper stepped back.

The Sioux dipped their lances in Army blood at Little Big Horn, but the U. S. Cavalry came back with a vengeance!

THE tramp sat on the high wooden sidewalk, his feet kicking tht dust of Canal Street. He was an unusually disreputable-looking man, his face covered with a two-weeks' growth of beard, his clothes in tatters. A floppy, shapeless hat with part of the brim torn off, was perched on top of a head that had needed a haircut months ago.

A horse-car stopped on Madison Street, some fifty feet from where the tramp sat. A passenger catapulted from

the car, landing on his hands and feet. The conductor and a couple of male passengers swarmed out and leaped upon the first man, while he was still sprawled on the ground. For a moment there was a furious scuffle, then one of the men screamed in sudden anguish and fell back. The first man tore loose from his assailants and started running up Canal Street. There was a long-bladed jackknife in his fist, from which blood dripped.

The conductor of the horse-car stared after the fugitive, yelling at the top of his lungs: "Stop that man! He's a pick-pocket and murderer!"

The fleeing man came pelting down Canal Street, heading for the east side of the street and the railroad tracks beyond. The tramp, still seated on the wooden sidewalk, watched his approach with indifference. For a moment. Then, suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"Herb Woodley!" he gasped in complete astonishment.

The fugitive shot a startled glance over his shoulder, then his legs seemed to churn the dust even faster. For a moment the tramp stood as if rooted to the ground, then a shudder ran through his lean body and he darted after the man he had identified as Herb Woodley.

He had only a few feet head start on the conductor and the passengers from the horse car, but he ran so swiftly that he quitckly out-distanced them.

The fleeing man was perhaps forty feet ahead of him. Reaching the far sidewalk, he darted into a passageway between two stores. At the end of the passageway was a high wooden fence. Woodley skidded to a halt in front of it. He whirled, threw his knife at the tramp, his closest pursuer, and thrust his hand into a pocket.

"Keep back!" he cried hoarsely. A gun appeared in his fist.

The tramp came to an abrupt stop. "Put that gun away," he ordered.

Behind the tramp, the other pursuers pounded into the passageway. There were exclamations of alarm and chagrin, as they saw the gun in the hand of Woodley.

Woodley looked at the height of the fence, groaned and then thrust the gun again in the direction of the tramp and the men behind him.

"Get back!" he yelled. "Get back, or I'll shoot."

"Shoot," the tramp said, hoarsely, "shoot and be damned to you, Herb Woodley."

For an instant Woodley stood his ground and it seemed that he was going to shoot, but then more people came up behind the tramp and he decided that his only chance stood in getting over the fence. He thrust his gun into his pocket and sprang for the top of the fence. He caught hold of it with both hands, pulled himself up and threw one foot over the top.

THE tramp sprang forward. Woodley, hearing the clatter of his feet on the boardwalk, twisted around and saw the tramp charging for the fence. He exclaimed in alarm and again reached for the gun that he had jammed into his pocket. The movement caused him to lose his balance on the top of the fence. He clawed wildly to recover, but could not quite make it and fell on the far side. He had scarcely struck the ground than the tramp was taking the fence.

Woodley clambered to his feet, only to have his ankle turn under him. He cried out in pain and fell to his hands and knees as the tramp hit the ground beside him.

The gun had fallen from Woodley's hand and lay a yard from him. Seeing his peril he lunged for it. But the tramp

beat him to it. He got his hand on it and started to whirl. Woodley, in desperation, kicked at him with his uninjured foot, upsetting the tramp.

He fell on his side and Woodley, drawing himself together, started to pounce on him. The tramp threw himself on his back; the gun in his hand came up . . . and belched fire and thunder.

Woodley cried out in anguish, rose to his feet. Clutching at his chest he swayed for a moment, then fell backwards to the ground.

There was a babel of voices on the
rying of feet.
stepped up to Woodley and looked
The tramp scrambled to his feet,

He broke off as a fit of choking racked Woodley. Blood welled up into his mouth, gushed forth in a torrent. Leach, stooping, caught hold of the down. The pickpocket was still clutching his chest. Blood seepeed through his fingers and a trickle of red was dribbling from his mouth. His eyes were twisted in agony. He was dying.

"Woodley," said the tramp, through clenched teeth, "I'm John Leach . . ."

The dying man's eyes were forced open. An expression of amazement and horror came into them. "Leach," he croaked, "you've been hounding me for years. Everywhere I've gone you've been on my trail. What—what kind of a man are you?"

The man called Leach said harshly: "I've followed you for eight years. I swore I'd get you and—"
other side of the fence, a sudden scurdying man's coat front. He shook Woodley.

"You're dying, Woodley," he cried. "In a minute you'll be facing your maker . . ."

"Damn you . . . Leach," choked Woodley. "Damn you . . ."

The face of a man appeared over the top of the fence, remained suspended as he looked down upon the tableau below. Leach, heedless, continued to belabor the dying Woodley.

"Woodley, where are O'Hara and Quade? Tell me before you die."

"Go . . . to . . . hell . . .!"

A groan of frustration escaped Leach's lips. He let go of Woodley and the dying man's head fell back to the ground.

A second head appeared above the top of the fence. Legs followed and a man dropped to the ground. Another man clambered over, then others.

Leach's eyes never left those of the man on the ground. Life was ebbing swiftly from Woodley's tortured body. A slow sigh escaped his lips and Leach, stooping again, thought the man dead. But then the lips parted once more.

"Joined . . ." came from the bloodied lips. "Joined . . . the . . . Cav . . . alry . . ."

A bubble of blood formed on the lips, broke, and Woodley was dead.

Leach stared down for a moment, then became aware that he was still holding the dead man's gun. He hurled it to the ground.

Beside Leach, a man said hoarsely: "He's dead!"

"Yes, he's dead," Leach said bitterly. "But he died too quickly. He didn't . . . suffer . . ."

The man stared at Leach in awe.

PASSENGERS were droppnig from the steps of the rickety wooden coaches even before the train came to a halt. There would be only a half hour's stop here; the lunch room was a small one and the train had a full complement of westbound passengers.

They poured into the eating room, weatherbeaten farmers of the Dakota plains, prospectors, headed for the Black Hills, cattlemen, soldiers, wom-

en, young and old. Even an Indian or two.

John Leach was one of the last to leave the train and when he reached the door of the lunch room he saw that all the seats at the counters inside were filled and that quite a number of people were already waiting. His breakfast had been skimpy and the thought of going without food until evening did not please him. He opened the screen door and entered the restaurant.

A quick glance at the nearest counter raised Leach's hopes. There were beans in front of every place, underdone, hard-looking beans. The diners would eat quickly and sparingly. Even as Leach thought of it, a man pushed back his plate, scarcely touched. He dropped a dollar on the counter and got off his stool.

"I wouldn't feed my pigs such slops," he said in disgust and turned away.

A girl in a green velvet traveling suit moved up to take the vacated stool. At the same time a blue-uniformed soldier with sergeant's chevrons on his sleeve, stepped forward from the other side. He beat the girl to the seat, placed his hand upon it and smirked, "The Army's beat you, lady," he said, "but I don't mind selling you this place for a small price. Say, a kiss."

The girl gave him a withering glance and stepped back. A second soldier, a corporal, moved up behind the sergeant and guffawed. "The lady'd rather not eat, Sergeant."

The sergeant's face, already red from drinking, got even darker. "I've kissed better'n her in honky-tonks," he snapped. He stepped away from the lunch counter stool and made a sudden lunge for the girl.

He would have gotten his hands on her, except that Leach lurched forward and the sergeant collided with him.

"Get outta my way," the sergeant snarled. He shoved roughly on Leach but found his body hard and unyielding.

"Easy does it, Sergeant," Leach said smoothly.

The sergeant stared at Leach in astonishment. "Are you trying to pick a fight with me?" he cried. "'Cause if you are, you've . . ." He broke off and sent a sizzling blow at Leach's head, which the latter ducked easily.

Leach stepped away. "You're drunk, soldier."

The sergeant's shoulders came up and made him look even bigger than he was. "Drunk or sober," he said thickly, "I don't take that from any man."

A sudden silence had fallen upon the eating room. It was broken by the girl in the green suit. "Please," she said. "I'd just as soon not eat."

It was a ridiculous statement to make at this stage of the game and neither Leach or the sergeant paid any attention to it.

His eyes fixed upon the baleful eyes of the soldier. Leach reached sidewards and pushed open the door of the lunch room. He backed out and was followed closely by the sergeant. On the station platform Leach continued to back away.

The soldier, mistaking Leach's desire for plenty of room, sneered: "You wanted a fight, stand still and take your beating."

THE two men were of a same height, six feet, within a fraction, but Leach weighed one hundred and seventy pounds and the other man at least thirty more. Leach's shabby clothes and his two days' growth of beard, gave him a deceptively drawn appearance, but his body was solid bone and muscle.

He stopped his retreat. "All right, sergeant," he said, "make your fight."

A cruel grin twisted the red face of the sergeant. He stepped forward, made a sudden feint with his left fist and swung savagely with his right. Had the blow landed, the fight would have ended then and there. But Leach ducked smoothly under the swishing fist and struck a light blow into the soldier's midriff.

The sergeant grunted. "If that's all you've got, mister," he snorted, "you're a dead duck right now."

He stepped forward contemptuously and swung a roundhouse right. Leach took the blow on his shoulder and let it swing him to the rear and right. From that position he uncorked a right hook, that exploded on the soldier's jaw. He followed with a smashing blow to the stomach, another right to the jaw and then a left into the bigger man's face. Blood splattered his fist and the sergeant, gasping, fell back.

Leach followed him, became a bit too confident and staggered back from a tremendous blow on his chest. The sergeant, bellowing, charged him like a wild bull, both fists flailing.

Leach realized that he had underestimated the big man. Liquored, he was, but he had lived a rough, outdoor life. Those two hundred odd pounds were solid. The man could take plenty and could deal it out, too.

Gritting his teeth, Leach went into a crouch. A fist grazed the side of his head, another crashed against his raised left arm, almost numbing it. Then Leach moved forward. He swung his right into the bigger man's midriff, drove in his left with every ounce of strength in his body, then straightening, smashed the sergeant's face with a right and left. The soldier fell back, panting hoarsely. He was still swinging wildly, but the power had gone from him. Leach took a blow that scarcely hurt.

And suddenly Leach stepped back. Measuring the sergeant, he put everything he had into one last final blow that hit the sergeant in the jaw and toppled him over backwards onto the wooden station platform.

The soldier landed with a crash. He was still conscious but unable to regain his feet. The corporal who had been with him in the lunch room, sprang forward and dropped to his knees beside his comrade-in-arms.

He saw that his friend was only momentarily incapacitated and bounced to his feet. "All right," he snarled at Leach, "you got me to lick now."

"No," said Leach, "I've no fight with you."

"The devil you haven't," cried the corporal and leaped at Leach. He was a wiry little man, not more than one hundred and fifty pounds in weight and standing around five feet seven. But his fist smacked Leach high in the face and stung. Groaning, Leach hit the little man a savage blow in the stomach, that sent him reeling back.

THE corporal would have returned to the fight, but at that moment, the sergeant gained a sitting position and the corporal deemed that assistance to his friend had first claim upon him. He turned, helped the sergeant to his feet.

"Can you make it, Jeff?" he asked anxiously.

The sergeant brushed the little corporal aside. "Where is he?" he asked thickly. "I'll murder him."

"Here I am," said Leach soberly.

Around them passengers were hurrying from the lunch room back to the train. The conductor's voice rose above the clatter and bustle. " 'Board . . .!"

Relieved, Leach rushed past the two soldiers for the train. He deliberately

went past his former coach and clambered aboard the one behind it. He found a seat by a window and dropped heavily into it. After a moment, as the train started moving, he drew a soiled handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his cheekbone, where he felt a warm trickle of blood.

Someone sat down beside him, but Leach did not look. A calm voice said:

"Thank you."

Leach's head swiveled and he looked into the face of the girl in the green velvet dress.

"Oh," he said. "You . . ."

She held up a tissue-wrapped package. "I brought you a sandwich, since I was the cause of you missing your lunch."

Leach grinned crookedly. "I don't think you had a chance to eat yourself."

"There are two sandwiches in here," she said, calmly, and began unwrapping them.

Leach stowed away his handkerchief, hesitated, then took one of the sandwiches from her. He took a bite of it, winced a little.

"I think he loosened a tooth."

"From the looks of him as I passed, he's got more than a loose tooth," the girl said. She looked at him thoughtfully. "I was afraid at first that you'd tackled a bit too much."

Leach shrugged. "I was in the car ahead all morning. I saw him put away at least a pint of whiskey. A man can't fight his best with that much in him."

The girl munched at her sandwich. Leach ate his own and finishing, said: "You're going to Bismark?"

She nodded. "Yes. It isn't much of a town, is it?"

"I've never been there. But it's the end of the railroad and has Fort Lincoln, so I imagine it's a pretty rough place."

"So Dad wrote me. He's at the Fort."

Leach gave her a quick glance. "An officer?"

"No, a sutler." She smiled. "By the way, my name is Molly Quade."

"How do you do, Molly Quade," Leach said softly. "I imagine I'll be seeing you at the Fort. I'm going there to enlist."

She looked at him in surprise. "You're traveling to Bismark deliberately to enlist in the Army?"

"In the Seventh Cavalry."

A little frown creased her forehead. "You'll be an enlisted man, a private . . ." She did not finish the sentence, but her eyes went to the door of the coach.

Leach expressed the thought in her mind. "And I've just got through fighting with a sergeant in the Seventh."

"Well," she said, "I hope you don't wind up in his troop, under him."

"The odds are against it."

BISMARK was a shabby little town of a single street of false-fronted buildings. But the activity on the street belied the smallness of the place. Bismark was the end of the railroad, the gateway to the Black Hills. It was a farmer's town, cattleman's headquarters, Army post and jumping-off place, all in one.

A man with a Ulysses S. Grant beard was on the station platform as Molly Quade descended from the day coach steps. He took her into his arms, and Leach, coming down the steps behind Molly, seized the opportunity to melt into the throng on the depot platform.

A short distance from the depot Leach stopped a man.

"How do I get out to the Fort?"

"Which Fort?"

"I thought Fort Lincoln was the only Fort around this neighborhood."

"Well, it is and she's the biggest

doggone Fort this side of St. Paul. Mmm, you've got yourself a right smart walk if you expect to get out there before sundown. Four mile and then you cross the river on the ferry . . ."

"Thank you," said Leach patiently, "now if you'll tell me in which direction to do that walking . . ."

"Why walk when you can ride?" asked the loquacious citizen of Bismark. He pointed to an Army ambulance. "There's a bus goin' right out to the Fort. They'll give you a lift, I'm sure. The driver's . . ."

"Thanks," cut in Leach, already moving toward the Army ambulance.

A couple of soldiers were just climbing aboard the wagon. One of them was the sergeant whom Leach had fought at the lunch station stop on the railroad; the other was his corporal friend. The sergeant had a mouse on his left cheekbone and his right eye was completely closed. He scowled at Leach with his unwounded eyes.

"What the devil do *you* want here?" he snapped.

"A ride to the Fort," Leach said calmly.

"This wagon belongs to the Army," retorted the sergeant.

"Of which I hope to be a member in about an hour," Leach said. "I'm going out to the Fort to enlist."

The sergeant stared at him in astonishment. "You want to—to enlist?"

"Why not?" Leach asked cheerfully. "I'm told that Army life's good for a man."

"Jeez," said the stocky corporal, "I hope I get you in my troop. I'll learn you a thing or two."

"As to that, Shorty," said Leach, "I'll be trying for some stripes myself."

The corporal sneered. "It took me six years to get these. Stripes come hard in the Seventh. You've got to *earn* them."

"Good," said Leach, nodding. He looked at the sergeant. "Do I get the ride?"

"You get it," the sergeant gritted, and in a day or two when I sweat the booze out of my system, I'll be lookin' you up."

"That's your privilege."

Leach climbed into the ambulance and two privates who had been standing nearby followed. One turned out to be the driver of the ambulance and taking up the lines, he cracked the whip over a handsome team of bays.

The ambulance rolled swiftly out of Bismark, followed a winding road that led along the river and in a half hour or so, boarded a flat-bottomed scow that deposited them across the river where the ambulance climbed a steep grade and entered Fort Abraham Lincoln.

IT was a massive enclosure, ideally situated and built to withstand the attacks of any possible Indian hordes. The back sides of the barracks, stables, storehouses and other necessary buildings, formed the outer wall and in the center was a great parade ground, large enough for cavalry drills.

The sergeant tapped the driver on the shoulder, shortly after the ambulance had entered the Fort. "Stop here," he ordered.

The ambulance came to a halt and the sergeant nodded to Leach. "Headquarters, where you enlist . . . if they'll have you . . ." He strode off, entering the headquarters building, as Leach got down from the ambulance.

"Stockbridge is my name," the little corporal told him, then. "Corporal Stockbridge of Troop M. I'll be seeing you around, I hope."

"Good enough." Leach started to turn away, then wheeled back. "What's the sergeant's name?"

"Dennis O'Hara, what else? And he's senior line sergeant of Troop M, the best troop in the whole regiment."

Leach nodded and crossed to the headquarters building. He stopped for a moment, then drawing a deep breath, entered. A headquarters clerk with corporal's chevrons on his sleeve sat at a plain wooden table, talking to Sergeant O'Hara.

"Who do I see about enlisting?" Leach asked.

"Me," replied the corporal. "Me and Major Comstock."

Sergeant O'Hara, grinning wickedly at Leach, winked at the corporal and left the room. The corporal pulled out a drawer in the table, brought out an enlistment blank and picking up a pen, looked at Leach.

"If you'll give me your name and the vital statistics . . .?"

"Name, John Leach."

"Place of birth?"

"Lexington, Missouri."

"A Johnny Reb, eh?"

"Hardly."

The corporal grunted. "Age?"

"Thirty-one."

"Previous service, if any?"

"Troop G. Thirty-second Missouri, Mounted."

The corporal looked up at Leach in some surprise.

"During the Big Fight?"

"April, 1861 to July, 1865."

"The full treatment, eh? Rank at date of discharge? If any."

Leach hesitated. "Brevet captain."

The corporal put down his pen. "A captain! Well!"

A man wearing the shoulder straps of a major, entered the room from a side door. The corporal caught up his pen again. "Uh, Major Comstock, sir, this man wants to enlist. He's, ah, a former captain."

Major Comstock came forward, looked sharply into Leach's face, then dropped his eyes to his shabby attire. "What outfit?"

"Thirty-second Missouri, sir."

THE major grunted. "The Thirty-Second did a rather good job at Yellow Tavern. Mmm, you commanded Troop G, did you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought I recognized you."

"Yes, sir, you commanded the third brigade at the time."

"That's right." A slight frown creased the major's forehead. "You know, of course, that the General is commanding this regiment?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you're aware that the Seventh is considered a crack regiment? You know what makes a crack regiment, in peacetime."

"Drill, sir."

"And discipline."

"Yes, sir."

The frown was still on the major's face. "I was thinking, well, that a former officer might find such a routine a bit, shall we say, distasteful?"

"I don't mind drill, sir. And discipline."

The major hesitated, then suddenly turned on the corporal. "Enlist this man, Corporal."

"Very good, sir."

Major Comstock pursed up his lips, regarded Leach for a moment, then nodded and stepping past him, strode out of the room to the parade ground.

The corporal finished scribbling on the enlistment blank then looked up sidewards at Leach. "Know Longhair?"

"Lieutenant Colonel Custer?"

"He still likes to be called General."

Leach made no reply to that and the corporal stood up. "Come next door with me and we'll have the doc look you over. If you pass, I guess

you can be sworn in."

The corporal led the way outside and to a door next to Headquarters, where a Lieutenant in the medical corps was seated at a desk.

"Lieutenant," the corporal said, "Major Comstock would appreciate if you'd examine this man at once, with a view to his enlisting in the Seventh."

The lieutenant nodded. "Very well, if you'll strip."

The corporal left Leach with the medical officer and Leach peeled off his clothing. The lieutenant tapped him here and there, looked into his mouth and listened to his heart and after a few minutes nodded approval. "You'll do."

Leach began donning his clothes and before he had finished, Major Comstock entered.

"All right?" he asked.

"Good enough for any Indian," the lieutenant responded, cheerfuly.

"Ready to be sworn in then, Leach?" asked the major. "This is your last chance to back out."

"I came here all the way from Chicago for only one purpose," Leach said, "to enlist in the Seventh Cavalry."

"Very well, then, raise your right hand."

ONE minute later, Major Comstock held out his hand. "You're now a trooper in the Seventh Cavalry . . ."

Leach shook hands with the major, then came to attention.

"Yes, sir."

"Report back to the office next door, and you'll be assigned. The corporal has a list of the troop vacancies."

Leach hesitated a moment, then saluted smartly. About-facing he left the room.

In the next room, the corporal was awaiting him. "The last recruit went to Troop J," he said, "but M's about as short of men as any, so . . ."

"Troop M," said Leach, "Sergeant O'Hara's troop."

"Why, yes, I believe O'Hara's in Troop M. Why . . .?"

"I thought he might have asked for me."

"So he did. Friend, isn't he?"

"No."

The corporal chuckled. "Of course if you want to go over my head . . ."

"Would it do any good?"

"Since the major's an old buddy of yours, probably yes. And if he says no, you can go over *his* head, right up to Longhair himself."

"I'll take Troop M."

"Sure enough? Well, that's mighty sociable of you, Private. Here's your papers. You'll find Troop M right smack across the parade ground. If First Sergeant Parker's sitting in a poker game, Sergeant O'Hara will take care of you, I'm sure."

LEACH accepted the enlistment records and leaving the headquarters office, crossed the parade grounds to the long row of barracks beyond. The barracks of Troop M were identified by a sign and he entered the orderly room.

The company clerk took his papers, examined them and looked sharply at Leach. "Just a minute," he said. He stepped through a door and Leach heard the rumbling of voices for a moment. Then the clerk returned with the first sergeant, a lean man with greying hair.

He came toward Leach. "I'm Parker, top-kick. This is an interesting service record you have."

Leach merely nodded. The sergeant cleared his throat. "Captain Holterman's the skipper here. Know him?"

"No, I don't."

"Thought you might. He had a regiment under Pleasanton. But come to think of it he went out to Missouri when Pleasanton was shifted there." He paused. "A good man, the skipper. Fair. I'll show him your service record."

"No need for that."

"Eh?"

"I'm not looking for a promotion . . . if that's what you had in mind."

The first sergeant frowned down at the service records in his hand. "You didn't by any chance have a, well, a bit of trouble on the outside?"

"The law isn't looking for me."

"Good. Not that it would make any difference. We don't give a damn what a man's done before he enlisted. Not unless it affects him here." First Sergeant Parker made a slight gesture. "Look up the supply sergeant and get your equipment. And you might see if the cook'll give you something to eat. You missed chow."

Leach found the supply sergeant's quarters at the rear of the barracks and there was issued uniforms, blankets, a few toilet articles and a carbine. Before he was ready, the company clerk sought him out.

"I've assigned you to Squad Room A," he said. Corporal Stockbridge will show you your bunk."

In Squad Room A, which overlooked the parade ground, Corporal Stockbridge chuckled wickedly when Leach made his appearance. "Well, well, me bucko, and here we are!" He clapped Leach on the shoulder, using a little more force than was necessary. "I'll have to take good care of you. Let's see, now, there's a vacant cot right there between Limey and Fiore. Private Egan used to have it, him that died of gallopin' pneumonia only last week."

Leach dumped his equipment on the designated cot. A long-legged, sandy-haired soldier sprawled on the cot to the right, winked at him.

"The corporal's a great one for jokes," he said.

"Speaking of jokes," Stockbridge said, baring his teeth, "when was you on kitchen police last, Limey?"

"Yesterday," replied the soldier called Limey. "And I had latrine duty the day before."

"Is that so? I remember now, you did a mighty fine job with those latrines. I think I'll recommend you for the duty again in a day or two."

"You do that, Corporal," retorted Limey. "And maybe some night we'll be seeing each other at The Point."

"Is that a threat, Limey?"

"A threat, Corporal? Me, make a threat to a superior? Me, who's been a soldier in one Army or another for fourteen years?"

THE corporal scowled and went off.

Limey sat up on his cot and held out his hand to Leach. "Potts, Cecil Potts, late of her Majesty's Indian Rifles, also Garibaldi's Carabiniers."

"You've been around," said Leach, shaking the Englishman's hand.

Potts grinned. "Also, a hitch with Price's Robbers, of Missouri."

"Confederate!"

The Englishman shrugged. "An error of judgment. I thought the South would win. However, I switched over to the Yanks in '64. Just in time."

Leach found an empty locker behind his cot and began stowing away his gear. The Englishman watched him until Leach was clad in his new blue uniform.

"Makes a difference, doesn't it?"

Leach nodded. "What sort of a lad is this Sergeant O'Hara?"

Potts grimaced. "An Orangeman, no less. He's licked every man in the troop at least once and he's working on the

second round now. A bad one." He screwed up his lips. "A fair soldier, though."

Leach started to make up his bed. "Ever hear of a soldier named Bligh?"

"In Troop M?"

"I thought he might be in one of the other troops."

"Never heard the name, but then there are a thousand soldiers at Fort Lincoln. Friend?"

"Not exactly." Leach sat down on the cot. "What about Morrison?"

"Charlie Morrison? Top Sergeant of L Troop. Oldtimer."

"How old?"

"He's got four hash-marks on his sleeve."

Leach creased his forehead in thought. "He wouldn't be over thirty-five, or thirty-seven."

"No. Sergeant Morrison's fifty, probably more."

"Then I guess it isn't the same man."

A heavy step sounded just outside the squad room and Sergeant O'Hara made his appearance. "Ah, private, you've put on your brand new uniform. Good. Good. Got a little job for you."

It was beginning. Leach got to his feet. "Yes?"

"If you'll be so good as to follow me . . ."

"A little latrine duty, Sarge?" asked Trooper Potts.

"I'll get around to you later," O'Hara promised. "Come on, Leach."

He started out of the squad room, Leach following. Outside, O'Hara led the way to a long, shed-like building at the far end of the parade ground. As they approached, Leach's nostrils caught the strong odor of horses and realized what was before him.

O'Hara opened the stable door and waited for Leach to enter. He pointed to a section of horses, each in his individual stall. "This place is a mess," he declared. "Somebody's going to catch it tomorrow, but in the meantime, you can do a spot of cleaning here."

"And after I finish?"

"You can hit the hay." O'Hara smiled thinly. "Remember now, only the stalls belonging to M Troop. I think that's seventy-two. It shouldn't take you over three or four hours, at the most. But do a good job."

LEACH found a fork and broom and pitched into the work. O'Hara watched him for a few minutes, perhaps hoping for a protest from Leach, but getting none, left the stables.

A grizzled old soldier, in fatigues, wandered up after a while. "How come?" he asked.

"I'm a recruit. Sergeant O'Hara's breaking me in properly.

"In the old dragoons, every man took care of his own horse," the old-timer said.

"But even in the old Army, noncoms rode men, didn't they?" Leach asked.

"Oh, it's like that, eh? Well, I've heard that O'Hara's as mean as a Pawnee. Got it in for you, has he?"

"A little. But I can stand it." Leach leaned on his manure fork. "Been in quite a spell?"

"Since '49. Four years more and they put me out to grass."

"How long have you been in the Seventh?"

"Since it was organized in '66. Fort Riley, first."

"Ever hear of a soldier named Bligh?"

"Can't say that I have. What's he look like?"

"About forty-five, tall, fairly well built. A good man with a sixgun."

"That cuts it down to about a hun-

"Bligh's handy with a pack of cards."

"That's half of the Seventh." dred men. What else?"

"That's all I know about him."

"You don't know him by sight?"

"I've never laid eyes on him . . . How about a chap named Morrison, but not the first sergeant of L Troop. A younger man, around thirty-seven, thirty-eight. Probably friendly with Bligh."

"I know Sergeant Morrison, but he's a year or two older'n I am. Came in during the fuss with the Mexicans."

"No, both Bligh and Morrison enlisted within the past four or five years."

"And they're in the Seventh?"

"I'm not sure; they're in the cavalry, that's all I know."

The old soldier snorted. "Then they could be anywhere—Riley, Jefferson Barracks, Leavenworth—maybe even Laramie."

"Yes, they could."

"And they couldda enlisted under other names."

"That's right."

"Then you got a fine chance of findin' 'em!"

Leach nodded thoughtfully. "But I'll find them . . . sometime."

He resumed his work and completed the task shortly after tatoo. In the darkness outside he walked to the M Troop barracks and tiptoed into Squad Room A. He found his bunk and undressing in the darkness, went to bed.

REVEILLE was at five-thirty and the troop lined up on the parade ground outside the barracks. Leach, not being assigned, took up a position with the non-coms and file closers. The present-or-accounted-fors were called out by the corporals, and reported by the first sergeant to Captain Holterman who made his appearance at the last moment. He went off, immediately afterwards, and the first sergeant dismissed the troop. Heading back to the barracks, Sergeant O'Hara caught up with Leach.

"What's the idea, Leach?" O'Hara growled. "You shouldda been out in the kitchen a half hour ago."

"Oh, I'm on K.P.?"

"A new man always catches K.P. his first day. Didn't you see your name on the bulletin board?"

"How could I see it?" Leach snapped. "It was dark last night when I got through in the stables."

"It's your business to look at the bulletin board every evening," O'Hara retorted. "Now, hurry up and get out to the kitchen, or you'll really get something worthwhile."

Seething, Leach went to Squad Room A, took off his uniform and put on fatigue clothes. As he was finishing, Cecil Potts made his appearance, carrying towel, soap and toothbrush. With him was a stocky, swarthy trooper, who turned out to be Fiore, the man who had the bunk on Leach's left. Potts introduced him.

Fiore chuckled. "I see you got K.P."

"O'Hara's riding him," Potts said. "He gave him some stable duty last night before he even got settled."

"That O'Hara," scowled Fiore. "One of these days we'll be out in the field again and maybe O'Hara won't be comin' back."

Potts winced. "None of that talk, Fiore!"

"Every man in the troop's got it in for him," Fiore continued angrily.

Leach didn't wait for the rest of the discussion. He hurried out of the squad room and following his nose, found the kitchen, passing through the mess hall to get to it.

A morose, lean man in cook's outfit, sized him up as he entered. "Did the

bugler forget to wake you?" he asked sarcastically.

"I didn't know I was on until reveille," Leach explained.

"Oh, no? Well, next time I'll send you an engraved invitation. Now get busy."

There was one other K.P. on duty, a grizzled old soldier, who knew all the shortcuts and performed the duties with a minimum of effort. The tin plates were already set on the tables in the mess hall and the two K.P.'s were kept busy during the next few minutes, carrying buckets of coffee to the tables, huge platters of hot cakes and mountains of bread.

Then the troopers were let in and the K.P.'s were kept scurrying back and forth, fetching refills. There was plenty of food and the sixty-odd soldiers of Troop M did full justice to it.

After breakfast came the washing of the dishes and then a two-hour spell of peeling potatoes. This was followed by the mopping of the mess hall and kitchen and a few miscellaneous chores that the cook managed to find for the K.P.'s. But at last it was ten-thirty and the cook told them morosely:

"Knock off now, but I want you back here at eleven-thirty. Not a minute later; understand?"

Leach went to Squad Room A, found it completely deserted and after looking over his gear and stowing it away more compactly in his wall locker, left the room. He stood for a moment on the veranda watching a troop of cavalry going through foot maneuvers, then suddenly decided that he needed a couple of items from the sutler's.

HE crossed the parade ground and found the sutler's store, a long, low building. He entered and found a half dozen soldiers, off dutp, drinking beer at the bar. Quade, the man with the U.S. Grant Beard, who had met Molly Quade at the depot in Bismark, was selling a can of smoking tobacco to a soldier.

Leach stopped to read a notice, announcing a ball, sponsored by Troop B and when he turned away, Molly Quade was behind a counter, watching him.

She smiled at Leach. "That's a very attractive uniform you're wearing."

Leach looked down at his fatigues. "I'll be wearing it most of the time, I imagine. Guess what troop I wound up in?"

"Not . . .?" Her eyes widened.

"Our friend's, none other. Troop M. Stable duty last night, K.P. today. Tomorrow . . .?" he shrugged.

The sutler finished with the other trooper, came over. "Dad," exclaimed Molly, "this is the man I was telling you about—the man who fought the soldier yesterday . . ."

The sutler grunted as he sized up Leach. "So you licked O'Hara, eh?" He shook his head. "He's a good man as a rule, a mite too quick with his fists, maybe, but a good soldier. One of the best in the regiment."

"That's Sergeant O'Hara you're talking about?" Leach asked.

"That's right. Oh, Molly's told me about the way he acted toward her, but he'd had a bit too much aboard, I imagine . . ."

"You're defending the man, Dad?" exclaimed Molly.

"And why not? I've known O'Hara for a long time—ever since I came to this post. He pays his bills and he hasn't made me any trouble. Least, not much." He regarded Leach steadily. "Which is more'n I can say for most cavalry men. They spend five cents for a glass of beer and think it entitles them to break up a dollar's worth of glassware." He grunted. "What is there about soldiers that makes them want

to fight all the time? I mean, on their own time, when they're not getting paid for it."

"Father," Molly said somewhat stiffly. "You're forgetting that Mr., I mean, Trooper Leach, had a fight yesterday because—because he came to my rescue."

"I hadn't forgotten it," retorted the sutler. He scowled at Leach. "Thank you, Trooper." And with that he turned and went off to wait upon a cavalryman who had entered.

Molly said to Leach: "Father isn't really as gruff as he pretends to be."

"With a thousand cavalry soldiers, he's got to put up a bluff," Leach conceded. "He had it right about cavalrymen fighting. In the infantry you don't find one-half as much fighting among the men."

"How would *you* know, soldier?" Molly asked, with a smile. "You've been in the Army only a matter of twelve or fourteen hours." She cocked her head to one side. "Or, have you been in before?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "During the war?"

He nodded.

"I should have known. You're old enough and I wouldn't say you were the type who'd hired a substitute."

"You're too young to know about substitutes," Leach said.

"Oh, am I? Just how old do you think I am?"

"Eighteen—not more."

"I was eighteen, two years ago. Almost three. Besides, my father's been a sutler for eight years."

"But you haven't been with him during all that time?"

"What makes you think I haven't?"

"You didn't know Sergeant O'Hara?"

"Oh." She smiled. "You caught me that time. Don't tell anyone, but this is my first day in the Army. I never saw an army post until last night."

"You haven't lived with your father?"

SHE shook her head. "I went to live with an aunt, after mother died . . . fourteen years ago. Dad was a freighter on the plains for some years and then he bought a sutlership eight years ago. I've seen him only a half dozen times since mother died. Then Aunt Clara passed away last month, and . . . well, there wasn't any other place for me to go."

"From what you've seen of army life, do you think you'll like it?".

"Yes—I'm sure." Her eyes went to the poster on the wall. "I understand there's a dance almost every week. I've been asked four times already this morning to go to the one tonight."

"Then you won't have any lack of dancing partners," Leach said.

Her face fell a little at that. Leach was aware of it and looked deliberately at the clock on the wall. "The cook'll be looking for me. Could I get some shaving soap?"

"Of course. I think there's some over here in this counter." She moved aside to the adjoining counter, searched and found the soap. Leach bought two or three other articles, then said: "I have no money. I suppose it's all right . . .?"

"It's customary, isn't it?"

"It's left up to the sutler. He gets it out of the soldiers' pay. But sometimes he prefers not to give credit to certain soldiers."

"Since I haven't seen *any* money passed this morning, I'm sure *everyone* gets credit here."

"Thanks. Put me down, then. Trooper John Leach, M Troop."

"Very well. And Trooper . . . I didn't say I had accepted any of those four invitations . . ."

He shook his head soberly. "You'd

better, because I'm sure Sergeant O'Hara has some plans for me for this evening."

"But he can't—not right after you've been on K.P."

"You'd be surprised what the ranking sergeant of a troop can do."

He smiled thinly. "Have a good time."

He picked up his purchases and left the sutler's store, aware that Molly Quade was staring after him. He crossed the parade ground, re-entered Squad Room A and stowed away his packages. Then he returned to the kitchen and found his fellow K.P. was still missing. But the cook put him to work.

The noon meal was disposed of and about three o'clock the cook again gave the K.P.'s a grudging hour to themselves. Leach used it up in bunk fatigue, then returned to the kitchen and had not a moment's rest until eight o'clock when he and the other K.P. wrung out the last mops and hung them out to dry.

Leach went to the washroom, stripped to his waist and washed himself thoroughly. Then he went up to the squad room and found Troopers Potts and Fiore, polishing their boots.

"Dance tonight," Potts said. "Hurry up, we'll wait for you."

"Hasn't Sergeant O'Hara been around looking for me?" Leach asked. "It's only eight o'clock and I'm sure there are some things I could do."

"Not tonight. He left for the dance ten minutes ago."

Leach hesitated a moment, then began peeling off his fatigue clothes. In five minutes he was dressed and ready. "Not bad," said Fiore, the little Italian soldier. "Now, let's hurry before all the girls get taken."

"There's twenty of 'em coming out from Bismark, I hear," Trooper Potts said cheerfully. "Two ambulance loads."

"You can have 'em," said Fiore. "Me, I was over to the sutler's today." He rolled his eyes. "His daughter's for me."

"The sutler's hasn't got a daughter," exclaimed Potts.

Fiore chuckled. "Oh, no? Well, you got a surprise coming to you, but I'm warning you, I saw her first. You try any of your tricks, Limey . . ."

"Uh-uh, even if the sutler has got a daughter, I've seen *him*." He grimaced.

THE dance was being held in a large room two doors from headquarters. As they passed the latter building, Leach saw lights inside and noted that there were three or four saddled horses tied to the hitchrail outside.

Then they entered the ballroom. They hung their caps on nails just within the door, then stepped forward into the main part of the ballroom, where were congregated some hundred or more troopers and about half that number of women. The regimental band was seated at the far end of the room, playing a waltz.

Fiore caught Leach's arm. "There she is, dancing with . . ." His face fell. ". . . With Sergeant O'Hara!"

Potts whistled softly. "She's all right, Fiore; for once in your life you didn't exaggerate. But what kind of a girl is she to dance with a skunk like the sergeant?"

"She doesn't know him, that's all," declared Fiore. "But she'll know all about him as soon as I dance with her." Then, as the band stopped playing, "Which'll be the next dance." He started forward across the floor.

Leach, watching, saw O'Hara leading Molly off the floor to the rear of the room. Fiore, cutting in and out, was hurrying to head them off. He saw O'Hara and Molly join a small group

that included the sutler. Fiore came up and addressed himself to Molly. Leach saw her smile, shake her head slightly and he imagined that the little trooper stiffened. At any rate, he bowed low and about-facing, walked off. But he did not come back to Leach and Potts.

"He got turned down," exclaimed Potts.

"I guess I'll try *my* luck," Leach said.

"You?" cried Potts. "With O'Hara hangin' onto her? Why don't you just put a gun to your head? It'll be quicker —and easier . . ."

But Leach was already crossing the floor. As he approached he saw that the group about Molly consisted entirely of non-commissioned officers and all of them vying for the attention of the sutler's daughter.

Then she looked past O'Hara and saw Leach bearing down. A pleased expression flitted across her face, but she erased it quickly.

Leach came up and bowing, asked: "Could I have the pleasure of the next dance?"

"Why, yes," she replied. "Sergeant O'Hara was to dance with me, but since I just had the last with him, I'm sure he won't mind . . ."

That was as far as she got. O'Hara, whirling, saw Leach. "You," he snarled, "what are *you* doing here?"

"Why, I've just asked Miss Quade to dance with me," Leach replied.

"I heard . . . and I *do* mind. Molly, I'm holding you to your promise."

"I don't recall making any promise," Molly retorted. "In fact, I don't even think I agreed to dance the next one with you."

O'Hara's face turned dark in sudden rage. But before he could speak again, the band started playing and Molly stepped out toward Leach.

Leach took her hand and led her out upon the floor. "So you made friends with him," he said, quietly accusing.

"What could I do? He came to the canteen this afternoon, apologized and . . ." A slight frown creased her smooth features. "You heard Father this morning about O'Hara. Thinks he's the salt of the earth . . . in spite of what O'Hara did yesterday."

"I see," said Leach thoughtfully.

"But let's not talk about Sergeant O'Hara," exclaimed Molly. "This is my first army dance and I want to remember it." For a moment or two she danced quietly, smoothly, with Leach, then he caught her looking at him.

He grinned. "I'm glad I was able to make it."

"So am I. I've been thinking about you, John Leach. I guess I talked to a hundred soldiers today, at the store. Privates, corporals, sergeants — officers . . ."

"And . . .?"

AND I've been thinking, there's something distinguishes the officers from the enlisted men. Even the sergeants. They lack something the officers have, a sureness about them. They carry themselves differently, the officers, I mean."

"The enlisted man's stiff," Leach said. "He gets that from drill, standing at attention, saluting officers. The caste system, in the army, is strong. Like this dance; it's for enlisted men, not officers. And the officers' dances won't permit enlisted men . . ."

"I know all that, John," exclaimed Molly. "But *you've* got it, the ease and carelessness of the officer. You said you'd been in the army before . . . you were an officer, weren't you . . .?"

Leach took two or three steps before he replied. Then he said: "Yes."

"I knew it! But why—why did you enlist as a private this time? Why didn't

you try for a commission?"

"It isn't so easy to get a commission in the peacetime army," Leach said. "Even when there are vacancies. You've got to pass certain examinations . . ."

"Could you pass them?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. But I don't know that I want to be an officer. If I wanted to make a career of the army . . ."

"You mean you just enlisted . . . for a little while?"

A faint smile crossed Leach's lips. "Five years. Not such a little while."

"Then why don't you try for the commission?"

Leach never got to answer that question. In the middle of the waltz the band suddenly went into a fanfare. In the abrupt silence that followed, a loud voice said:

"Attention, men of Troop M. You are wanted at your barracks immediately. Men of Troop M, report to your barracks at once."

"That's me," Leach said to Molly.

"What does it mean?"

"Hardly a drill."

"The troop can't be going out, at this time of the night?"

"I wouldn't be too sure of that. Well . . . goodbye, if I don't see you again for awhile."

He gave her a half salute and walked off. Outside, soldiers were already hurrying across the parade ground. The barracks of M Troop were ablaze with lights and when Leach entered Squad Room A men on all sides had packs spread out on their cots and on the floor and were rolling them up.

Corporal Stockbridge looked up from strapping a neatly rolled pack. "You got twenty minutes, Leach," he snapped.

"For what?"

"To get ready for marching."

"What's up?"

Stockbridge winked. "The general told me, but said I should keep it a secret."

Leach hurried across the room and there found Potts and Fiore already getting their gear in order.

"We ride!" exulted the Englishman.

"Any chance of action?"

"There's always a chance, out here in the Dakotas. When Custer said there was gold in the Black Hills he practically declared war. The Indians say the white man can't enter the black Hills, but try to keep out a white man if he thinks there's gold anywhere."

THE little Italian, Fiore, snapped at Leach: "You did all right with the sutler's daughter, I noticed."

Leach grinned. "I forgot to tell you —I met her on the train yesterday. In fact, she was the cause of my fight with O'Hara . . ."

Potts stared at Leach. "You had a real fight with O'Hara? But you're not even marked up and he—"

"I won."

Fiore vaulted clear across his bunk and stared up at Leach. *You* licked O'Hara?"

The Englishman whistled softly. "No wonder he's got it in for you!"

"And Stockbridge," Leach added in a low tone.

"You beat the two of them?"

"Stockbridge didn't really count. I merely slapped him down."

Potts came up close to Leach. "Then watch yourself, if we get into action."

"I'll watch him," spat out Fiore. "And I'll watch O'Hara, too. I've got it in for him and if he tries any funny stuff . . ."

A bugle split the night and whistles in the barracks began to blast. Noncoms, in the various squad rooms, yelled: "Fall out, M Troop!"

The troop formed quickly on the

parade ground. It was the only troop outside, so apparently the maneuver would involve M Troop alone. The noncommissioned officers made their reports, there was a quick search for delinquents and then, well within a half hour from the time of the first announcement in the dance hall, the troop marched to the stables. Horses were saddled and the troop formed again upon the parade ground.

Leach drew a powerful gelding, which had a bit more fite than he cared for, inasmuch as he had not been in a saddle for a couple of years. But he thought he could manage the animal. Ammunition, both carbine and revolver, was issued and then the bugler blew, "Boots and Saddles."

M Troop mounted.

Captain Holterman sized up his troop and gave an order to the first sergeant, who repeated it. Then it ran through the platoon sergeants and corporals.

The troop marched, riding through the gates of Fort Lincoln, out onto the Dakota prairie land.

Leach, still a file-closer, found himself riding behind Sergeant O'Hara, but they had gone a mile or more before O'Hara seemed to notice him. Then he allowed his horse to fall back beside Leach's.

"Little party I'm putting on for you, special," he said thinly. "Hope you like it."

"Sioux?"

"Yep. And you know what? They don't fight with their fists. Oh—I forgot, you're an old soldier. Fought all through the Big War. Captain, too, weren't you?"

"That's a long time ago, O'Hara."

"Sure. Maybe you forgot what a bullet sounds like. Although I hear these little playmates didn't just use guns today. Arrows, lances. Ever see a lance wound? Or what the Indianas do to their prisoners?"

"What," asked Leach, "would it take to make you lay off, O'Hara?"

The sergeant chuckled wickedly "The pleasure of reporting you A. W. O. L."

"That you won't get."

"I think maybe I will. I've been studying you, Leach. You're a gentleman, underneath. You can take only so much."

"I can take as much as you can dish out, O'Hara."

"The Seventh Cavalry isn't big enough for the two of us."

Leach lapsed into silence. There was no use bandying words with O'Hara. The sergeant was a man who knew how to hate. Nothing would assuage that hate. Nothing but the utter destruction of the cause of it. John Leach.

O'Hara rode back to his position and the troop continued on into the night.

Shortly after dawn a halt was called and the troopers dismounted and stretched cramped muscles.

THE edge of the sun was creeping up over the eastern horizon, but in all directions Leach saw nothing but undulating prairie. No, there was a thread of smoke to the north and west. He watched it for a moment, then caught the eye of Trooper Cecil Potts.

"Smoke," he said, nodding.

"Damned if it isn't." The Englishman's eyes went to the head of the column, where Captain Holterman was gathered in a small group with the two lieutenants, the top sergeant and an Arikari guide.

Nearby, O'Hara was conversing in low tones with Corporal Stockbridge. Potts looked at them and said to Leach, "Somebody ought to tell the skipper about the smoke."

"They'll see it."

"It may be important. Know why

we're out?"

"Sioux, I suppose."

"Naturally; but they're out in pretty strong force. Bunch of about fifty attacked a wagon train yesterday. Twelve people in it, four women. Killed them all." Potts frowned then suddenly started for the head of the column.

As he came up to Stockbridge and O'Hara, the latter suddenly shot out an arm and blocked the Englishman. "Hold your place, Potts."

"Sure," said Potts, "and I was only going to report to the captain that there's a bit of smoke goin' up there to the north and west . . ."

O'Hara wheeled, searched the horizon and finding the thread of smoke, exclaimed, "What of it. I've seen it for the last five minutes." But he turned on his heel and started for the head of the column.

Leach, watching, saw him salute the officers, then talk and point toward the smoke. He could not hear the conversation, but knew that they were discussing the discovery. A moment later the command rang out:

"Prepare to mount!"

The troop was off again then, but the route had been changed from due west to north and west. And the Arikari and a corporal went ahead of the column. They separated after awhile, the Arikari heading directly for the smoke and the trooper going in a more westerly direction.

The pace of the troop was swifter, now, and the skirmishers rode out further to the right and left. The smoke became plainer for awhile, then faded and after ten or fifteen minutes could be seen no more.

An hour after sunrise the Arikari returned to the troop, driving his horse at a swift lope. He talked ot the captain for a moment, and then the command came to put the tired cavalry horses into a trot, a command at this time, that indicated extreme urgency.

The troop crested a rise in the ground and then the soldiers saw ahead and below, the cause of the smoke, although the smoke itself now consisted only of a few wisps here and there.

A half mile ahead lay what was left of a wagon train. Black, charred wood, twisted iron and steel, shreds of scorched canvas . . . and a number of huddled bodies.

The troop covered the remaining distance at a gallop, but arriving at the scene of the massacre, scouts and videttes were thrown out before the order to dismount was given.

The embers were still warm to the touch, the wagon tires hot. The bodies still had the blood, uncongealed. There were nineteen, including three women and two children. All had been scalped, most of them mutilated.

"The bloody heathens," Trooper Potts swore softly.

Fiore's swarthy face was two shades lighter. "I still say Sheridan's got the right idea; kill every damn Indian in the West and you'll get peace. They're savages and that's the way we ought to treat them." His eyes were on the mutilated body of one of the children.

THE bugler blew a couple of notes on his trumpet, somewhat to the surprise of the troopers. But looking toward the captain they saw him signal for the men to assemble.

"We should bury them," he announced, "but we're not going to take the time. This happened at dawn and it's my guess that the scoundrels are less than an hour ahead of us. Our horses are pretty worn, but it's my hunch they've gone into camp not so far from here, and if they have, we'll get them. Dance-in-Rain, how many would you say there were?"

The Arikari looked at the ground, spat and shrugged. "Maybe twenty."

Captain Holterman exclaimed: "Twenty Indians wouldn't have killed all of these people, unless they caught them completely by surprise and the signs don't indicate that they did."

Dance-in-Rain spat again. "Maybe hundred. Maybe hundred and fifty."

The captain scowled and turned his back on the Indian. "Prepare to mount!" he ordered.

The troop mounted and quickly got back into columns of two. Captain Holterman threw out additional skirmishers, with instructions to come in the moment they sighted a single Indian, and then the troop was off.

The horses, having rested a few minutes, were in better shape and the troop made swift progress toward the west. The trail of the Indians was easy to follow. Knick-knacks, clothing, edibles taken from the burned wagon train, scattered the trail.

The country became more hilly and Captain Holterman pulled down the pace of the troop after awhile. There was no sense in rushing headlong into an ambush. There were a half dozen skirmishers ahead and if they sighted Indians they would let the troop know soon enough.

Finally, after more than an hour of traveling from the scene of the massacre, a skirmisher was sighted galloping back. Captain Holterman promptly stopped the troop.

Behind the first skirmisher came another.

The soldiers talked to the captain for a moment, then wheeling their horses, rode back the way they had come. The captain signalled for the troop to advance again, at a walk.

The head of the troop crested a low hill and came to a halt. In low tones the sergeants, then the corporals, gave the order to advance on a front. In a few minutes the entire troop was spread along the top of the hill.

A quarter mile ahead was a broad shallow stream in the center of which was a small, wooded island. Halfway down the hill, toward the stream, the skirmishers had halted, a half dozen men widely scattered.

When they saw the troop deployed upon the hill, the skirmishers, as if by a signal, began turning their horses and converging, rode back.

As the first man approached, he called out: "Indians on the island, Captain!"

"How many?"

"Don't know, but they've seen us and they haven't lit out."

A second skirmisher came up. "They're prepared to fight, sir."

THE captain studied the wooded island with his glasses. On each side of him, the lieutenants were doing the same.

The captain lowered his glasses. "I don't count more than twenty horses."

The Arikari scout grunted. "Maybe twenty. Maybe hundred."

The captain addressed the first lieutenant: "From the trail I'd guess closer to the hundred, wouldn't you?"

"Easily that, sir. Did you examine the ridge on the far side of the island?"

"Yes, and I don't like it. Nor do I like the thought of twenty Indians trying to fight this troop."

"It could be a trap . . . Wait . . . they're mounting their horses . . .!"

Captain Holterman nodded grimly. "I wish they'd charge us. This is a good position. We'll dismount and . . ." He broke off and whipped the glasses to his face. "They're retreating!"

That was apparent now, even to the troopers not possessed of glasses. Mounted Indians suddenly charged from the island to the open beyond,

their horses splashing through not more than a foot of water. Although the range was prohibitive the Indians began banging away with their guns, as they fled.

"Troop attention!" cried Captain Holterman. "At a trot, forward—ho!"

M Troop went down the hillside toward the stream, a quarter of a mile away. They rode on a compact front, at a brisk trot, ready for a charge, or for retreat.

On the far side of the river, the Indians suddenly halted, halfway toward the crest of the ridge. They milled about for a moment, then spread out into a semblance of a front and fired a ragged volley in the general direction of the advancing troopers.

An eighth of a mile from the river, Captain Holterman gave an order to the bugler and he brought the troop to a halt with a quick call.

"I don't like it," Holterman said to his lieutenants. "Twenty Indians who've started to run away wouldn't stop like that in the face of a troop of cavalry."

"You're right, sir," said the first lieutenant. "I don't think we should cross that river until we know what's behind that ridge."

And then, suddenly, they knew. One moment the ridge was bare, the next it was thickly studded with mounted warriors, appearing as if from under the horizon.

They came charging down the steep slope at a full gallop, hundreds of them.

"A trap!" roared Captain Holterman. He swiveled in his saddle, shot a quick glance back at the slope that the troop had recently vacated. It was about the same distance, now, as the river, and offered a good defensive position.

But the island in the river offered a better one.

"Forward!" cried Captain Holterman. "To the island—at a gallop!"

FORWARD the troop went, at a thundering gallop. The smaller group of Indians who had led the troop on, were closer to the river and the island than the soldiers, and they saw the intent of the troop and charged forward, well ahead of the main body of Indians. Behind them came five hundred Sioux, yelling, whooping and shooting.

The troop hit the shallow water and went across it without faltering. They reached the sandy island, a hundred feet across the water and began leaping headlong from their horses. The small group of Indians were a few yards ahead of them, but when the soldiers went for them, with carbines and spitting six-shooters, they broke and fled. Not more than half of them reached the water and only three or four of those got safely across.

"Down," came the command. "Use whatever shelter you can find and fire at will."

The Indian horde hit the water and enveloped itself in the spray of water created by two thousand splashing hooves. But the soldiers knew where to fire and spray did not turn bullets.

Forward the Indians came, whooping and firing. The soldiers were down on the sand. They were armed with Spencer repeating carbines, each weapon capable of firing seven times without reloading. And then they had six-shooters for closer range.

A storm of lead met the Indians as they hit the water, increased as they advanced across the hundred feet of the shallow stream and became a veritable hurricane as they approached the little island and came within revolver range.

The splashes in the water now were caused by Indian bodies. Horses went down, dying and wounded, threshed about and screamed in awful anguish.

A solid sheet of fire and death belched from the little island of men, chopping down the first wave of attacking redmen.

The weight of the Indians behind pressed on those in front, but the front line was melting under the hail of death.

And then, suddenly, when several Indians had actually touched the sandy soil of the island, the charge broke. For an instant the Indians milled madly, then the general movement was to the rear.

"Let them have it!" The cry went up among the troopers and the soldiers rose to their feet and blazed away with everything they had.

The Indians reached the shore, but they left a good many of their number in the shallow waters and they lost a half dozen men more as they fled up the slope to the ridge, just out of accurate carbine range.

"Cease firing!" yelled Captain Holterman to his troopers. "We've beaten them off, but they'll charge again as soon as they reform. It'll be a stronger charge than the last. Get out your entrenching tools and dig—dig!"

THE soldiers realized well the gravity of their position and they threw down their carbines and began digging in the soft sand. They used trench tools, a few shovels, knives and even their hands. They worked furiously. All except two troopers who would work no more and a half dozen who were having wounds bandaged.

Up on the ridge the Indians were forming a line of battle. They created a front at least a hundred feet wide and

five horses deep. The formation consumed less than five minutes of time and then the second charge began.

Warned by the bugle, the men of M Troop threw down their spades and other trench tools, dove for the shallow pits they had dug and caught up their rifles.

"Hold your fire until I give the command!" Captain Holterman ordered. He had himself appropriated a carbine from one of the dead men and was in one of the front pits, lying beside a trooper.

Down the hill came the whooping and yelling Indians. Bullets whistled through the trees of the island, smacked into wood, or plunked into sand. Horses were hit, screamed and plunged about, but the soldiers remained in their pits, grim and watchful.

The first rank of Indians hit the water, a hundred feet away.

"Steady!" cautioned Holterman. "We've got to stop them this time."

The fire of the Indians became more deafening. Here and there a prone soldier was hit by a wild bullet. One trooper, unable to restrain himself fired and dropped an Indian from his horse. But the rest of the troop obeyed the captain's order.

Closer the Indians came. Seventy feet, sixty . . . .

Fifty.

"Fire!" roared Captain Holterman.

A solid sheet of fire and death belched from the little island, caught

the front rank of the charging Indians and almost completely decimated it. Horses and men went down by tens, scores. The entire line of charging Indians became a maelstrom of falling horses and men, over-ridden by and intermingling with the second line of battle.

Frantically, the soldiers on the island pumped out empty cartridges, injected fresh ones into breeches. The second volley was a bit more irregular than the first but only slightly less lethal. A score of Indian ponies went down, with almost twice that number of Indians. Riderless horses plunged and reared, galloped aimlessly forward, sidewards.

And again the soldiers poured in their deadly fire.

Single Indians reached the island, went down under pointblank fire. One or two threw themselves from their horses and dove for soldiers, but were quickly disposed of.

A hundred Indians went down in that inferno of fire and death poured forth from the island. Some were only wounded, and fled on foot, or caught hold of riderless horses. Some remained in the water, reddening the shallow stream.

The charge melted away. No red men could stand such a withering blast of death. Rifles they understood; they had guns themselves. Some were possessed of repeating rifles, but a solid troop of entrenched men with repeating rifles that fired over and over in seconds was too much for any Indian charge.

The Indians fled back to the mainland, up to the crest where they were out of range.

ON THE island the troopers sat up to count their own losses. Horses were down everywhere, others wounded, were dashing about aimlessly, crashing here and there to earth.

Wounded men there were. And dead men. Too many of each. Eight dead now, almost half of the survivors with at least one wound. Captain Holterman sat up and examined a bloody thigh. The first lieutenant was dead. First Sergeant Parker was dying from three wounds.

Little Fiore, in the shallow pit beside John Leach, had a flesh wound in his left forearm. He was tying it up with a dirty handkerchief, swearing softly to himself.

Leach was one of the fortunate ones. He had come out of the two Indian charges completely unscathed.

"Here," he said to Fiore, "let me do that for you."

He took up the little man's arm, twisted the handkerchief tightly about the arm and knotted it securely. "As good as new."

"I got at least three of 'em, so help me!" Fiore exclaimed. "I got that big buck with all the feathers. Musta been Sittin' Bull himself."

Trooper Potts crawled over from a neighboring pit. A trickle of blood seeped down his face from a scratch on his forehead, but otherwise he was unwounded.

"Join the cavalry!" he chanted. "Join the United States Cavalry and see the life on the Great Plains." He sat down in the hole and wiped his perspiring forehead. "I thought the Fuzzy-Wuzzies in Africa were fighting fools, but these redskins are ten times worse. The way they charged into our bloomin' guns . . . Ten seconds more and we wouldn't be talkin' about it right now."

"Do you think they'll come again?" Leach asked.

The Englishman shook his head. "I hardly think so. Time means nothing to

them and they know they've got us tied down. We haven't got horses for twenty men and withour wounded . . . No, we're sewed down here."

He ducked to one side as a bullet plunked into the sand only a couple of feet from his legs. "Oh-oh, now comes the sniping!"

The Indians, reassembled on top of the ridge, two hundred yards or so from the island now began banging away at the besieged troopers. The range was just a little too far for accurate fire—accurate for Indians, notoriously bad marksmen, but the island was small and the number of the snipers was large and bullets that were aimed at one man could just as well hit another.

The soldiers got down into their rifle pits and lying prone or on their sides, dug them deeper, throwing the sand into parapets in front of them. The horses unfortunately, were unprotected and they suffered the most damage.

The Indians did not charge again, but in ten minutes of desultory firing accounted for every horse on the island. Another man or two was hit, but in general the soldiers had burrowed themselves down into safety.

ABOUT an hour after the second charge, the Indians made a decisive move, although it was not necessarily a vital one to the beleaguered troopers. Almost half of the Indians moved downstream, three or four hundred yards and there crossed. They moved back upstream and took up a position on the hill where Captain Holterman had originally planned to make a stand. It was almost a quarter of a mile from the island, but bodies of the Indians moved down closer to the river and galloped their horses back and forth, making feints toward the island, but always remaining just out of rifle shot.

The soldiers fired at the Indians occasionally to discourage them, but on the whole conserved their ammunition. The Indians kept up a continual, spasmodic firing.

It was hot on the island, lying in the sand. The wounded got the water from the canteens and the unwounded began suffering from lack of water.

The situation of M Troop was precarious. Captain Holterman summed it up in mid-afternoon with Lieutenant Gregson, the sole officer on the island who remained unharmed.

"K Troop is supposed to move out tomorrow," he said, "but the plan was for them to patrol south and west. They won't come within thirty miles of us here."

"What do you make it to the Fort, Captain?" the lieutenant asked.

"Fifty miles, a few more or less. We moved pretty steadily during the night and we must have covered ten miles today. In fact, I think sixty miles would be more like it."

"A good man could make it on foot in twenty hours."

"I know; I've been thinking. The Indians will move down to the water as soon as it gets dark, but still there's a hundred feet on the west and almost that much on the east side. A man would have a chance of getting down to the water, then circle around and get behind the Indians and head out for the Fort. He could get there by dark and the relief column could make it here by morning. Forty hours. We've enough rations and after dark we can fill the canteens . . . How's the ammunition?"

"Not too good, sir. We could stand one more charge, but not much more. However, I think the Indians have had enough of that. They lost a hundred men or more in those two charges."

"I know. They don't know our own losses and I don't think they'll have the

stomach for another try."

But they did. The Indians, believing a charge from both sides of the water could succeed, made one more try in the late afternoon. It wasn't as determined a charge as the second one of that morning, but the garrison on the island was greatly depleted and the charge came close to succeeding—closer than the Indians realized. In fact, if it hadn't been for the wounded, even some who were seriously wounded, firing rifles as fast as they could manage, the Indians would have overrun the island.

They didn't succeed and lost thirty or forty men in the attempt, but the death toll on the island was increased by six more men and many more wounded. Less than fifteen men remained untouched and the captain, himself, received another wound, which incapacitated him completely. Lieutenant Gregson took over the command.

CROUCHED in a rifle pit he talked to the surviving non-commissioned officers. "I don't have to tell any of you, the spot we're in. It couldn't be worse. We're all right until morning, but if the Indians make one more charge we're done. I don't think they will and we've got to play it from that supposition. I want some volunteers to try to get through . . ."

Every one of the four surviving non-commissioned officers promptly volunteered.

"I'll risk two of you," Lieutenant Gregson said, "but I need a couple of enlisted men, too. K Troop will be riding out tomorrow. We've got to try to intercept them, but on foot it's going to be easy to miss them. However, we'll try, but we'll need a couple of men to head directly for the Fort. At intervals, in case the first don't get through. O'Hara, you know the country pretty well, you'll try to contact K Troop. Plennert, you'll take off an hour after O'Hara. Now, I want two men to go for the Fort. It's not necessary that they know the country as well. They'll just have to head straight east and south, a little. It's a good stiff hike, but I don't see how they can miss the Fort once they hit the trails. They all lead to the Fort. Sergeant O'Hara will you call for a couple of volunteers?"

"Yes, sir."

O'Hara crawled out of the rifle pit and on hands and knees scuttled for a trench, in which Fiore, Leach, Potts and another trooper lay.

"Ah, me brave Indian fighters," the sergeant chuckled. "And how do you like this business? Anything like Yellow Tavern? Or Richmond?"

"Some good men died today," Trooper Potts said, disgustedly, "but I don't see even a scratch on the likes of you."

"You look pretty good yourself, Limey," retorted O'Hara. "Fit for a nice bit of rescue work. The lieutenant says volunteers only, but I'm sure you'll volunteer."

"Of course."

"What about me?" growled little Fiore.

"You've got a bum leg, Fiore." O'Hara looked at Leach.

Leach nodded. The fourth trooper snapped. "What about me?"

"Too late, son. Potts and Leach are fine able-bodied men. We need two. Come along, brave lads."

O'Hara crawled out of the pit, followed by Leach and Potts. The lieutenant's pit was a tight fit, but the three men squirmed in.

THE lieutenant shook his head when he saw Leach. "You're the recruit. I got a glimpse of you during the last charge and you did very well, but I

think this job requires a more experienced soldier . . ."

". . . Four years with the 32nd Missouri, sir," Leach said, promptly.

"Under the General hisself," O'Hara backed up Leach. "He outranked yourself, no less. A captain."

"Well," said the lieutenant, looking at Leach with interest. "I didn't know. In fact, we'll have to talk about that. Later. All right, you'll do. You and Sergeant O'Hara will go downstream first. O'Hara goes to try to intercept K Troop somewhere to the south. You'll head for the Fort. An hour after you've gone, Sergeant Plennert and Trooper Potts follow. You'll take your revolvers, but I don't think carbines will be practical."

Night fell swiftly over the island in the middle of the river. The troopers saw campfires go up on the two ridges that hemmed them in and knew that the Indians would be eating cooked meat. Some of them would be sleeping and resting, but for those on the island there would be little of either. Rations, they had, and water, now that they were able to fill their canteens under cover of the darkness.

In a pit at the water's edge, Sergeant O'Hara and Leach prepared themselves. They divested themselves of blouses and caps and revolver belts. O'Hara tied a handkerchief rather tightly about his throat and thrust his Colt's revolver into the back of it, so the six rounds of ammunition that it contained would not get wet. Leach went through the same operation and then Lieutenant Gregson shook hands with both of them.

"I don't have to tell you what this means. Taking unnecessary chances may mean the death of every man here. Speed isn't as important as getting through. Good luck."

THE two men crawled into the shallow water and remained still for a moment. An Indian on the west shore let go with a rifle, but as the shot was not taken up by others, the men in the water assumed that it was merely fired for morale purposes and after a moment moved off in the water.

The water wasn't deep enough to swim or even float and the men had to crawl along on hands and knees, slowly, carefully in order not to make a splash. In places the water was no more than an inch or two deep, but fortunately the bottom of the creek was sandy and the going was not as difficult as if it had been mud. Against this, however, were the Indian campfires up on the ridges and close to the water, farther downstream. They created enough light so that moving objects could be seen in the river, if anyone was watching.

Detection was certain death, a fact of which the two men in the water did not need to remind themselves. In the first half hour they proceeded less than a hundred yards.

O'Hara, who was in the lead, then waited for Leach to catch up to him. "The water seems to be deeper along the west bank," he whispered. "And there's a bit of an overhanging bank. I think we'd move faster under it."

Leach made no reply but as the sergeant worked his way to the right side of the stream, he followed. O'Hara was right, the water was two feet deep and in spots even deeper and there was a bank of the same general height overhanging the water.

The two men were able to get to their feet and by crouching low doubled their speed. In another half hour they were a quarter mile downstream. The water became shallower again, but emboldened by their success so far the two soldiers remained on their feet and proceeded another quarter of a mile.

Then Sergeant O'Hara climbed out of the water. "We part here," he said. "It's just as well for me to stay on this side of the river, but your best bet is to cross now and head for the east." He pointed to the edge of an almost full moon that was coming up over the eastern horizon. "There's your direction."

Leach nodded, turned away, but O'Hara called softly to him. "Don't get the idea that this ends our little fight. I'm merely postponing it."

Leach made no reply, but stooping, crossed the river. At the low bank he paused for a moment and strained his ears. Had he heard a sound?

If so, it was not repeated.

The outskirts of the Indian camps were almost a mile upriver. There were no doubt single Indians roaming about, but Leach was on the alert, ready to sink to the ground in an instant. He was dripping wet and the night was chilly, but movement would keep him warm.

He took the revolver from his neckcloth, started to thrust it into the waistband of his trousers, then believing the moisture might creep into the cartridges, decided to carry it in his hand.

He struck out eastward, walking with long strides, but bent over to form as small a silhouette against the skyline as possible. He walked a hundred yards from the river and stopping, suddenly turned in his tracks.

A hundred feet away, a blob of shadow dropped to the ground. Leach threw himself to the ground, cocking his revolver at the same time. Flame lanced toward him from the darkness and a revolver split the stillness of the night.

LEACH groaned inwardly. The shot would bring other Indians. The safest place was the river, but it was a hundred yards away and he had to pass or skirt his attacker. Yet to remain where he was was too dangerous.

A voice suddenly called: "Soldier!"

A white man's voice.

Leach tensed himself. "Yes?"

Fire split the darkness once more and sand splattered Leach's face. But then he was on his knees, triggering his own gun. Once, twice.

A figure leaped up, a hundred yards away. Leach snapped a third shot at it, a fourth, then held his fire. The range was too far for accurate revolver shooting at night—and the man who had stalked him was fleeing rapidly toward the river.

Leach's impulse was to go after the attempted assassin, but thought of his mission deterred him. Instead, he whirled and bent low started running eastward as swiftly as he could. He ran a quarter mile, then dropped and pressed his ear to the ground.

He caught the faint drumming of horses' hoofs, but although he listened for a moment or two, the hoofbeats did not become appreciably louder and Leach knew that they were following the river bank, which he had vacated only a short time ago.

He got to his feet and began running again. An eighth of a mile and he went down and listened again. He could still hear the hoofs pounding the prairie, but they were even fainter than before. He got up again and this time ran a full half mile. When he listened he could no longer hear the drumming of the hoofs.

He got up and drawing a great breath began walking. He had to conserve his strength, for sixty miles lay ahead of him.

He walked steadily for three hours and judged that he had covered eleven or twelve miles from the river. The moon was high in the sky and the prairie was almost as light as day. He stopped for five minutes and t hrew

himself down upon the grass to rest.

Rising, he again started his eastward journey and walked until the sky in the east turned gray. Then he enjoyed ten or fifteen minutes rest. When he got up, dawn was breaking in the east.

It was a half hour later that he saw the two horsemen on the horizon. There was a shallow buffalo wallow a few yards away. Bent low, Leach raced for it.

In the depression he watched the horsemen. They were approaching him and before many minutes Leach made out that they were Indians. The way they were coming they would pass him within a hundred yards.

Leach burrowed down into the wallow and strained his ears to listen. The Indian ponies were traveling at an easy lope, but suddenly the beat of their hoofs stopped. Leach knew that he had to risk a look. Cautiously he raised his eyes above the low parapet of the wallow.

Fifty yards away, the two Indians sat on their ponies, looking directly at Leach's hiding spot. Even as Leach saw them, the Indians let out a yell and charged.

Leach scrambled to his knees, thrust forward his revolver and in that instant remembered that he had but two cartridges in his gun. He could not afford to miss.

ONE of the Indians had a long rifle, which he was trying to aim at Leach; the other seemed to be armed only with a lance. Leach covered the one with the rifle, stepped swiftly aside at the moment he guessed the man was about to shoot and avoided the bullet that came.

Then Leach fired. For an instant he held his breath, then groaned aloud as he realized he had missed. He cocked the revolver the second time, waited until the charging Indians were no more than thirty feet away, then fired the second and last time.

The Indians with the rifle plummeted to the ground, but his horse came on. Leach, ducking frantically aside, escaped from being knocked down by the horse. The second Indian, armed only with the lance, overran Leach, but whirling his pony on hind legs, came back at him.

The gun in Leach's hand was empty, there wasn't time to get the dead Indian's single shot rifle and load it. Leach backed away and the Indian, seeming to sense that Leach was at a disadvantage let out a whoop and charged, the lance pointed for Leach's body.

Leach drew back the heavy six-shooter and threw it at the Indian's head. He missed, but the throw saved his life, for it caused the Indian to jerk his head aside and the point of the lance barely grazed the side of Leach's body.

Leach turned with the lance, grabbed at it with both hands and gaining a savage hold, dug his heels into the ground. The Indian pony bumped against him, but Leach, holding for his life, jerked the Indian from the pony's back.

The man landed heavily, bounced up and turning a complete somersault, came to his feet, with his tomahawk raised.

For an instant the two men, red and white, faced each other at a distance of a dozen feet. Leach had a lance, the other man a tomahawk.

The Indian's hand went back for a throw and then Leach lunged forward with the lance. A numbing blow struck his left shoulder, but it was too late. The momentum of Leach's rush carried him forward. The point of the lance entered the Indian's breast, went

clear through his body.

Leach let go of the lance, staggered aside and watched the death struggle of the Indian. Then he sat down, shaking. After a few minutes, he peeled back his shirt and looked at his shoulder. The blunt edge of the ax had hit him and the skin was not even broken, but the flesh was an angry red. In a while it would turn black. He tested his shoulder and winced at the pain, but got heavily to his feet.

The first Indian lay off a short distance. Leach walked over, found that the rifle was an ancient muzzle loader and decided that he was just as well off without it. It would only hamper his speed in traveling.

The horses.

Leach made a complete circle, saw them both scampering off in the distance. Without a rope it was useless to even attempt to catch one.

IT was late afternoon when Leach caught sight of a sod house a mile or so to the north. He shifted his course and approaching the house, saw a horse in a pole corral. He broke into a run, heading for the corral instead of the house. As he reached it, a man came running out, but Leach, ignoring him climbed the poles and dropped down into the corral.

"Here you," cried the settler, "what do you think you're doing?"

Leach, already heading for the horse, spoke over his shoulder. "I need your horse—I've got to get to the Fort as quickly as possible. My troop's surrounded by Indians . . ."

"Indians! Where . . . ?"

"To the west; I've been walking all night . . ."

"Take the horse! Leave him at the Fort and I'll pick him up later." The man climbed through the poles. "Here —let me catch him for you . . ."

He caught up a bridle from a post and approached the animal, which having shied away from Leach, let his master come up. The man slipped the bit into the animal's mouth, began strapping on the bridle.

"I've got a saddle in the house . . ."

"Can't take the time," Leach said. He caught hold of the bridle and vaulted up on the bare back of the horse. "Open the gate."

The man ran for the corral gate, let down the bars. "Are they—I mean, is there any chance of their coming this close . . . ?"

"No," said Leach. "The entire Seventh will be out after them in a day or two. They'll wipe 'em from the plains."

He touched the horse's flank with the heel of a boot and the animal sprang through the gate.

AN hour later, Leach rode past the sentry at the gates of Fort Lincoln and brought his tired mount to an abrupt halt in front of Headquarters.

Major Comstock, coming out just at that moment, saw Leach, blinked and exclaimed: "Say—aren't you in M Troop . . ."

Leach sprang to the ground and saluted. "Yes sir, I've just come from the troop; we're cut off sixty miles from here. Half of our men are already down . . ."

"How many Indians?" roared the major.

"Five hundred, sir. Perhaps more . . ."

"Wait . . . !"

The major whirled, dashed into headquarters. He had scarcely disappeared than the corporal clerk came dashing out. He shot past Leach, heading for the guardhouse at a dead run

The major popped out of Headquarters again. "What's the position, Leach?

Is there—any chance?"

"Yes sir, if the Indians didn't make another charge today. We beat them off three times yesterday, with extremely heavy losses. The last charge wasn't too strong. The troop's on an island in the middle of a river . . ."

"I know the place. Rode past there only a month ago. If Captain Holterman . . ."

"He's down, sir. Badly wounded. Lieutenant Gregson's in command . . ."

A bugler came dashing out of the guardhouse. He put his trumpet to his lips and blew "Boots and Saddles." Instantly the Fort was the scene of tremendous activity. Men by the hundreds, came dashing out of buildings, rushed into others. Horses appeared from the direction of the stables. Officers dashed past enlisted men and the latter did not salute.

A captain came rushing up to Major Comstock. "What is it, Major?"

"M Troop—in a bad way. This man's just come. We've got to move out. Where's the colonel?"

The captain, looking past the major, pointed. "Coming!"

Leach turned and saw him striding toward the group in front of headquarters; Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, the nominal head of the famous Seventh Cavalry. Custer, the one-time Boy General. Hero of Gettysburg, Yellow Tavern, the Shenandoah, the man who broke the last lines at Appomattox Courthouse and demanded the surrender of the Army of Virginia from Old Longstreet himself.

Longhair, Scourge of the Plains. Indian-fighter. Hero of the Washita, friend of Sheridan, Sherman and Grant, once court-martialed and soon to face a court for a second time and within a year . . . Little Big Horn.

He strode up, tall and rawboned, his long yellow hair and fierce mustaches in fine contrast to his exotic self-designed uniform.

"What's going on?" he demanded when still several paces away.

" 'Boots and Saddles,' sir," responded the major. "M Troop's been cut to pieces; they're holding on, but it's an all night ride . . ."

"Four troops," snapped Custer. "Four troops now and two, in reserve to leave in an hour. Captain, will you send for my orderly? And, Major, I want you to take command of the reserve."

The captain strode off, Custer nodded to the major and turned away. His eyes took in Leach, standing at attention, went past him. He took two steps, then wheeled and his sharp eyes searched Leach's face.

"I know you. From where?"

"Thirty-second Missouri, sir!"

CUSTER'S eyes squinted for a moment, then widened in astonishment. "Thirty-second Missouri! Good Lord, I remember now. You're the man —of course—you led the company that broke up Stuart's right wing . . .?" He snapped his fingers. "Captain Leach!"

"Private Leach, sir!"

The general took a step toward Leach. "*Private* Leach! That's ridiculous . . ."

"I only enlisted two days ago."

"You enlisted . . . as a private? Why the devil didn't you come to me? . . . Wait a minute, I remember, I recall something else now." His sharp eyes again searched Leach's face. "There was some trouble . . . I was in St. Louis after the war and when I read about it, I sent you a note . . ."

"Yes sir!"

"Ah yes, I never forget a face or a name. It comes back to me." He shot a quick look over his shoulder. "There isn't time now, but . . . M Troop,

aren't you? Of course! You're the man who brought word. Are you up to riding back with us?"

"Of course, sir!"

"Good. You'll ride with me." A smile flitted across his gaunt features. "Not like we did during the war, three thousand strong, but enough for any bunch of savages we're apt to meet. I guess they need to be reminded of the lesson I gave them on the Washita . . . Here comes the orderly with the horses!"

A trooper, riding one horse and leading another, came up, saluted Custer. "Ready, sir!"

Custer returned the orderly's salute. "You'll stay here this time. Captain Leach will ride your mount."

The orderly dismounted, gave Leach a curious glance and handed him the reins of his horse.

Custer sprang into the saddle of his own mount. "You've told Mrs. Custer?"

"Yes, General."

"Good." He pointed across the parade ground. "What's holding up F Troop? The men aren't even out of the barracks. Get over there and tell the commander I want his men in the saddle in five minutes."

The orderly ran off and Custer shook his head. "It's a good regiment, Captain Leach. I made it. I've given nine years to it."

"I know, sir."

A hundred yards to the left the band had assembled in front of its quarters. It struck up the regimental march: *Garry Owen* and Leach, watching the general, saw the proud smile that came over his face.

Across the parade ground the troops were marching toward the stables. One was coming out, mounted and started toward the front of the Fort, at a brisk canter.

FIVE minutes later, four troops of the Seventh were swirling through the gates of Fort Lincoln, Custer, with Leach at his side, riding at the head. By sundown the battalion was five miles from the Fort.

The Seventh Cavalry pushed westward through the night. It made periodic rest stops, but they were short. The horses were crowded to the limit of their endurance, but only a few men fell out along the way. The Seventh Cavalry was a good regiment; the men were the best, the mounts were well chosen and from frequent hard exercise, had developed stamina.

Dawn found the regiment plodding along at a mile eating pace. Leach, getting his bearings, discovered that they were already beyond the scene of the wagon train massacre.

"An hour, sir," he told the general.

Custer nodded. "We've made good time and the horses aren't in too bad shape. Although I'm afraid we won't be able to pursue them, before afternoon." He sighed. "But the main thing's to save M Troop."

A skirmisher came galloping back. Custer spurred his horse out to meet him.

"We flushed a couple of Sioux, sir!" the skirmisher told him. "But they got away. Our horses weren't fast enough."

Custer scowled. "So they'll know we're coming!"

"I'm afraid so."

"We won't find a savage within five miles of M Troop, then."

And it turned out that way.

When they came in sight of the river, there were campfires still burning, but men of the Seventh were already on the river bank, waving their hats.

Only a few men, though. The rest were on the island. Twenty-four dead, twenty-nine wounded. Only eight men

without a wound. One sergeant on his feet. Captain Holterman in a coma, Lieutenant Gregson, conscious, but suffering from a head wound. And not a Sioux in sight.

But there were surgeons with the relief party and they were quickly among the wounded. Camp was pitched on the east shore of the river and in a half hour Major Comstock's reserve troops came up. They were followed only twenty minutes later by the missing K Troop, from the south.

Sergeant O'Hara was with K Troop.

THREE days after M Troop was rescued, Leach was back at Fort Lincoln. Four troops of the Seventh were still out, but the others had returned to the Fort, many of the men in ambulances. The squad rooms of M Troop barracks each had only a man or two in them. In Squad Room A there were only Leach and a private named Miller. Corporal Stockbridge had died on the island. Fiore and Potts were alive, but in the hospital; Potts having received a wound after Leach's departure; only a few minutes, in fact, before he himself was supposed to have attempted a break-through.

In the middle of the afternoon, a hospital orderly came into the Squad Room. "Private Leach!" he called out.

Leach raised himself from the bunk on which he was resting. "Yes?"

"Private Leach? Lieutenant Gregson sent me over from the hospital. You're to report to him. At once."

Leach got wearily to his feet, opened his locker and got out his blouse and cap. The hospital orderly had already left and Leach followed. In front of the barracks he was hailed by O'Hara, coming out of the orderly room.

"Here, Leach, where do you think you're going?"

"To the hospital."

"Guess again, Trooper. There are a million things around here . . ."

"Uh-uh," said Leach. "Not just yet. Orders. Lieutenant Gregson's sent for me . . ."

"What for?"

Leach shrugged. "Ask him."

O'Hara stared at him. "Been complainin' to him, have you?"

"About what, Sergeant? That you followed me across the river, after we left the island and tried to shoot me?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" O'Hara cried.

"You don't know?"

"You know damn well I don't. But if you're trying to pick a fight with me . . ."

"Not today, I'm still too tired. Besides . . ." Leach looked up the street. "The lieutenant wants me — right away!"

He walked past the sergeant.

Standing on the veranda of the sutler's store was Molly Quade. She saw Leach when he was still fifty yards away and running down the short flight of stairs came to meet him.

"John!" she said. "You're back . . . and well!"

"You were worried?"

"Of course. When we heard how many had been . . ." A shudder ran through her and her hand came up involuntarily and gripped Leach's arm.

"O'Hara's back, too," he said.

She whipped her hand from his arm, stepped back. "O'Hara!" she exclaimed. "Do you think . . .?" her face flooded with sudden color and she whirled and ran away from him.

Leach stood still, watcher her disappear into her father's store, then drawing a deep breath he continued on to the hospital.

An orderly conducted him to Lieutenant Gregson's bed. The lieutenant was propped up, a couple of pillows be-

hind his back. His head was swathed in bandages, but he was able to wink at Leach.

"A little rough, wasn't it, Leach?"

"A close one, sir!"

"I hope I never have a closer. Captain Holterman will be out of action for two or three months, I'm told, but I'll be up and back at the troop in a week. In the meantime . . ." He He stopped and regarded Leach steadily. ". . . The troop's yours . . ."

Leach blinked in astonishment. Mine? I—I don't understand."

"As of today, you're first sergeant of M Troop, replacing Sergeant Parker. A good man."

"First Sergeant," repeated Leach. "But there are other sergeants left, and corporals . . ."

"You're going over them. Some men will be transferred from other troops, including some non-coms, no doubt, and there'll be replacements, but the first sergeant's job is yours—permanently."

LEACH'S eyes clouded. "I'm not sure that I want the rank, sir. I appreciate what you . . ."

Sergeant!" exclaimed Gregson. "You're a soldier of the Seventh Cavalry. No man in the Seventh refuses to obey an order." Then he relaxed. "And this order comes from the top, Sergeant. The General. He was here a half hour ago, asked me what sort of a troop M Troop thought itself that it could keep a man with your background a private . . ."

Ten minutes later, Leach turned in to M Troop barracks, but instead of Squad Room A this time, he headed for the orderly room.

O'Hara was sitting in the first sergeant's swivel chair, his feet up on the roll top desk. A cruel smile twisted his lips as he saw Leach.

"So you came right back. Couldn't wait . . ."

"Get out of here," Leach snapped. "Get out of this room and stay out . . ."

For an instant O'Hara stared at Leach. Then his boots hit the floor with a crash and he kicked back the swivel chair.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he cried.

"Pull yourself together, O'Hara," Leach said grimly. "This is going to hurt—but you, this time. I'm the new first sergeant of M Troop. Get that, O'Hara, I'm the top sergeant of this outfit!"

The blood drained from O'Hara's face. His mouth fell open and a groan came from his throat. "No," he whispered. "It can't be. It can't . . ."

"But it *is*, O'Hara, and furthermore, until Lieutenant Gregson gets out of the hospital, I'm in complete command of this troop. Now, get out of here and think it over . . ."

O'Hara reeled from the room.

TEN men were transferred to M Troop the next day. They came from various troops, the men each troop commander thought he could most readily spare. A couple of regular M Troopers, with only slight injuries, drifted back from the hospital and two or three additional came the following day. They trickled back all through the next week. A pair of recruits came to the Fort from eastern recruiting offices and were assigned to M Troop. Gradually the troop regained its strength and First Sergeant Leach found his days full from his duties.

He saw O'Hara during the following week, but the man seemed to have lost his spirit. Most of the time he avoided Leach and when he did encounter him he avoided speaking. During that week, Leach had occasion to go several times to the sutler's store, but only once was

Molly in the place and she was waiting on another soldier at the time.

The four troops of the Seventh returned from the plains; they had encountered no body of hostiles. As always, the Indians had dispersed before the determined pursuit of a large group of soldiers. Nothing was settled, but reports of isolated atrocities trickled into Bismarck. A small party of Sioux raided a ranch here, an emigrant at another place. Prospectors in the Black Hills disappeared; sometimes their mutilated remains were found, often not.

Three weeks from the date of the fight at Nelson's Island—named after the First Lieutenant of M Troop who had died there—Lieutenant Gregson returned to the troop. He came into the orderly room wearing the shoulder straps of a first lieutenant.

He made a tour of inspection with Leach and complimented him afterwards. "The troop's looking good again, Sergeant."

"We're still short twelve men, sir."

"We'll get them gradually; we've first call on the recruits coming in. I think I'd rather have them than the misfits that the other troop commanders would palm off on us in transfers. By the way, you've noticed I've moved up a grade."

"I have, sir. Congratulations."

"Thank you. I'm still the only active officer in the troop, for Captain Holterman will be laid up another month or so. There's a second lieutenancy open. I talked to the skipper yesterday and we, that is, he, wondered if you cared to try the officers' examination . . .?"

Leach hesitated. "Is that an order?"

"No. You can't order a man to become an officer in the Army. Only . . ." Lieutenant Gregson frowned. "I believe you could pass the scholastic examination without any trouble. You were a lawyer once . . ."

"Who told you that?" exclaimed Leach.

"As a matter of fact," the Lieutenant said slowly, "I know your story. The General that day at the hospital let something drop and I—I've had a lot of time in the hospital. I got hold of an old newspaper file . . ."

"I'd rather not talk about it, sir," Leach said bitterly.

"You mean it still bothers you . . . after nine years?" Lieutenant Gregson stared at Leach for a moment, then changed the subject abruptly, talking of troop matters. When he left a few minutes later, Leach went into the little bedroom off the orderly room that was the first sergeant's quarters and threw himself down upon his cot.

FOR a long time he lay there, staring sightlessly at the ceiling, as memories crowded in on him.

Nine years. Nine bitter, empty years. And the end was not yet in sight.

He rose heavily from the cot, went into the orderly room and stared out of the window upon the parade ground, where a cavalry troop was drilling.

Exclaiming softly he left the room and walking to the stables saddled his horse and rode it out of the Fort, down to the ferry landing and across the river.

On the north bank of the river he put the horse into a brisk canter, in the direction of Bismarck, four miles away.

He rode into the town and tied his horse to a hitch-rail a short distance from the railroad depot, in front of a saloon, which bore a huge sign across its false-fronted second story: *Dakota Palace.*

Leach ducked under the hitchrail and entered the saloon. It turned out to be a long, narrow room with a bar running down one entire side. About three

feet of the back bar mirror was broken out.

Leach stepped up to the bar and pointed to a bottle of rye on the back bar.

The bartender picked up the bottle, held it in his fist and scowled at Leach. "How many drinks are you going to have here?"

"Does it matter?"

"It matters. A soldier come in here yesterday, had five drinks and broke that there mirror. You can have four drinks, that's all."

"Four'll be about all I can stand in this place," Leach retorted.

The bartender put the bottle down on the bar and watched Leach fill a small glass to the brim. "If you put your fingers around the glass," he said sarcastically, "you could get an extra half inch. No wonder your sutler's moving out, the way you soldiers do things."

Leach tossed off his whiskey, without spilling a single drop and started pouring out a second glass. Halfway through the job, he looked at the bartender.

"What sutler's moving out?"

"Quade, who else?"

"Quade's leaving Fort Lincoln?"

"I just told you he was. How come you don't know about it?"

"I've been busy." Leach filled up the glass, sipped at it slowly. "Why's he leaving?"

"How should I know? All I heard was that he sold his license and was pulling out for the Black Hills . . ."

"The Black Hills!" exclaimed Leach. "With the Indians on the warpath?"

The bartender snorted. "I never heard of no Indians stoppin' a gold hunter. There's a town sprung up out there, Deadwood; she's a rip-snortin' place from all I heard."

"And have you heard of the new Indian law?" demanded Leach grimly. "Every Indian off the reservation after January 31st is declared a hostile. Have you any idea what that means?"

"No Indian law ever meant nothin'."

"This one means war; a full scale Indian war."

"Pah! A regiment of soldiers shoots three Indians and it's an Indian war. Like that stuff last month. A hundred soldiers surrounded by eight Indians. The Battle of Nelson's Island! The trouble with you soldiers is you got to play everything up big. Make yourselves heroes . . ."

"You don't like soldiers, I take it?" Leach asked ominously.

"You take it right. Come in here, spend forty cents, shoot off their mouths and break up . . ."

"Like this!" said Leach and catching up the bottle of whiskey, hurled it at the head of the bartender. The man ducked frantically and the bottle missed him by the width of a sheet of paper. But it didn't miss the back bar mirror. It smashed virtually all that was left of the glass.

THE bartender let out a howl that could have been heard at Fort Abraham Lincoln. Then he caught up a bung-starter and started climbing over the bar.

Leach stepped back, waited for the man to clear the bar, then stepped forward and sent a smashing blow to the man's stomach. He followed through with a terrrific uppercut that sent him reeling back against the bar.

He fell to the floor from there, but Leach didn't bother to watch him. He turned on his heel and headed for the door. He swung through and outside turned left. He walked fifty feet and entered another saloon.

The bartender here was a silent man and Leach had two drinks. Then the

door bellied inward and the bartender from the Dakota Palace came in, followed by a lean, lank man who had a star on his vest.

"There he is, Marshall!" the bartender cried, pointing. "Broke a hundred dollar mirror, four bottles of my finest whiskey. Not to mention bustin' a chair over my head."

"That right, soldier?" asked the Marshall quietly.

"I broke a bottle of whiskey," Leach replied.

"What'd you wanna do that for?"

"He made some remarks about the Army that I didn't care for."

"He lies like hell!" howled the bartender. "He came into my place, drunk, lookin' for a fight. He practically wrecked the place, then he says he broke a bottle of whiskey. I want a hundred dollars, no less!"

"I'll pay you for the bottle of whiskey," Leach said. "The mirror was already broken."

"Well," said the Marshall mildly, "there seems to be a difierence of opinion as to the amount of damage done. I guess we'd all better go to see Judge Lipscomb and get it straightened out."

"I'll pay two dollars—for the whiskey," Leach said, doggedly. "I don't need a Judge to decide what I did."

"You're resistin' arrest?" The Marshal shook his head. "I hate to do this, but if I hafta, I hafta . . ."

His right hand went down, came up and a long-barreled Frontier Model was suddenly in his fist. Then the lanky Marshal stepped forward and with a movement that was pure lightning, laid the barrel of the gun along the side of Leach's head.

Leach went down like a "good" Indian. He lay on the barroom boor, utterly motionless. "They just won't learn," the Marshal said sadly. He motioned to the bartender. "Grab hold of his legs. I got respect for Uncle Sam's uniform and I don't like to *drag* him over to the jailhouse."

Molly Quade, coming out of the Grand Leader Department Store, headed across the wooden sidewalk with her arms full of parcels. She had to stop as two men carrying a limp soldier crossed the sidewalk in front of her.

She grimaced in aversion at the sight, glanced idly into the unconscious soldier's face, then exclaimed, "What's wrong with him? Is he . . .?"

"Naw," replied the Marshal laconically. "He ain't dead. I buffaloed him, that's all."

"Why?"

"Drunk, disturbin' the peace. Nothin' serious, the Judge'll fine him twenty-five dollars and turn him loose."

"After I get paid for the damage he did to my place," snarled the bartender, who was carrying Leach's legs.

"Sure, sure," said the Marshal soothingly. "Well, come on, he's heavier'n he looks. Let's get him delivered . . ."

The two men continued across the street with Leach, while Molly Quade stood on the sidewalk and watched them until they disappeared into the stout log cabin that was the Marshal's office and jail combined.

ONE moment Leach was in utter oblivion; the next he was awake and aware of screaming pain in his head. He groaned and opened his eyes. He saw a dirty face, almost concealed by a matted beard, a foot over his own. He rolled to one side, sat up and wincing back the shooting pains in his head looked around.

He was lying on a bare canvas Army cot, in a room not more than ten by twelve feet in size. A single window with iron bars across the outside of it lit up the room.

There were two other canvas cots in

the room, but only one other resident, the possessor of the dirty face, a derelict of indeterminate age. Snaggled teeth grinned at Leach.

"Right smart spell of sleep you had, mister. Four hours, almost."

Leach looked at the solid puncheon door that led to the front of the building. "This is the jail?"

"I guess you could call it that," said the vagabond. "Me, I prefer to call 'em calabooses. That Marshal fella's sure rough, ain't he?"

"He took me by surprise."

"Me, too. I wasn't doin' a thing, just mindin' my own business, then, wham. I wake up in here . . . I got thirty days, on account I didn't have twenty-five dollars to pay my fine. Eighteen days more to go . . . But I thought it was against the law to arrest a soldier. I remember my old pal, Herb Woodley, he was gonna join the Army on account of the law was after him for a small matter . . ."

Leach sprang up from the canvas cot and grabbed the hobo by the shoulder. "Did you say Herb Woodley?"

"Yeah, d'you know him?"

"If he's the Herb Woodley I know, he's dead . . ."

"I guess that's Herb, all right. The law got him in Chicago, two-three months back. Shot him down like a dog . . ."

Leach's fingers dug into the vagabond's shoulder. "How well did you know Herb Woodley?"

"Hey, you're hurtin' my shoulder," cried the hobo, trying to struggle out of Leach's savage grip.

Leach relaxed his grip on the man. "How long did you know him?"

"We bummed together for three or four years. We rode more freights, we was in more jails together . . ."

Leach shoved the man back. "When? I want dates. When did you first meet him—where . . .?"

"It musta been about '71 that I first met him." The hobo suddenly backed away from Leach. "Say, you—you ain't the old pal of Herbie's what enlisted in the Army . . .?"

"I was no friend of Herb Woodley's," snarled Leach. "I'm the man who killed him."

The hobo backing away was stopped by the log wall of the jail. His eyes were rolling in terror and his mouth twitched. "Y-you're the man followed Herb all those years, the fella he was always afraid of . . .?"

"I'm the man," Leach said, moving toward his cellmate. "I followed Woodley for nine years and I killed him. But he died too quickly, he didn't suffer like I meant for him to suffer." He came up to the hobo and reached for him again.

The man slumped down to his knees, his arms thrown up to shield his face. "D-don't, mister, don't—don't kill me . . ."

"Then talk," Leach said ominously. "Tell me everything you know about Herb Woodley, or so help me . . ."

"Sure, sure," babbled the ragged man. "I'll tell you everything—everything you want to know. Like I told you, I bummed with him for three years and all that time Woodley was scared stiff. Of—of you . . . Said you were followin' him. He wouldn't stay any place more'n a day and sometimes he doubled back on his trail just to . . . just to see. He—he said you were a devil. Herbie said that, not me. Said you were going to kill him . . ."

"Did he ever tell you why?"

THE hobo gulped. "No. I—mean he said he didn't do it. It was the other fellows . . ."

"Who?" cried Leach. "Did he name them?"

"Some fellows he used to run with. I—I can't seem to remember their names now. Herb told me, but I—I . . ."

"Bligh," said Leach. "Bligh and Morrison . . ."

"That's them," explained the hobo eagerly. "Bligh, Billy Bligh and—and Sam Morrison."

"Now, wait a minute before you go any further," Leach said. "I'll tell you the story straight and you can fill in the pieces." He drew a deep breath. "Nine years ago, Woodley, Bligh and Morrison held up a bank in Lexington, Missouri. As they came out, they got panicky and began shooting in all directions . . . A bullet hit a . . . a young lady . . . Helen Alderton. The bullet lodged in her spine and she was paralyzed . . . for seven long months before death gave her relief. Woodley, Bligh and Morrison got away, but I saw one of them—Woodley. I saw him from the window of Judge Alderton's law office, across from the bank . . . He rode right under me, and he looked up as he passed. I remembered his face and I—well, that's how I was able to follow him. I knew what he looked like. But unfortunately, I didn't see the faces of the other two men. Bligh and Morrison . . ."

"But you weren't a lawman," cried the hobo. "Why should *you* want to spend all that time runnin' them down . . .?"

"I studied law under Judge Alderton," Leach said soberly. "He'd taken me into partnership with him and . . . and I was to marry his daughter, the day after she was shot . . ."

"Gawd!" breathed the vagabond hoarsely.

A shudder ran through Leach and he began harsh, vindictive once more. "I got Woodley and I'm going to get Bligh and Morrison if it takes me the rest of my life. Now, what do you know about them?"

"Nothin', honest, Mister, I never saw neither one of them. Herb said they broke up not long after that—that bank job . . ."

"Then how did you know that one of them enlisted in the Army?"

The hobo gulped. "I—a couple of years ago we was in St. Louis. We was campin' in a jungle down by the river and one day Herb come in from workin' the main stem and said he was goin' to enlist in the army. Said he'd run into an old pal of his who'd enlisted four years ago and was a sergeant . . ."

"A sergeant?"

YEAH. Woodley kept talkin' what a fine appearance he made. Big, strappin' sergeant. Woodley was all worked up, said the army was the best place in the world for a man to hide. All the time he'd been runnin' and hidin' his old buddy, the sergeant, was livin' high and fine. Well, he went up and tried to enlist the next mornin' and . . . and the Army wouldn't take him. Never saw a man so disappointed . . ."

"This sergeant," Leach said carefully. "Did Woodley say what name he was using?"

"Yeah, but I can't seem to recall it. I never met him myself." He squinted in thought. "I seem to remember, though, that it was some kind of Irish name . . ."

"O'Hara?" Leach suggests softly.

"O'Hara, O'Brien, somethin' like that. I'm not sure. It was a name you hear all the time. Couldda been O'Hara . . ."

"Skip it for a moment. Now, think carefully. This soldier—whatever his name was—did you get the impression from Herb Woodley that *he* knew he was being hunted?"

"The sergeant?"

"Yes."

"Well, sure, it was him gave Woodley the idea that the Army was the best place for him to lose himself. The Indian country, he said, nobody in his right mind would go out there lookin' for somebody, with the Indians on the warpath all the time . . ."

Leach whirled away from the hobo, headed for the door at the other side of the cell, but before he reached it he turned back.

"Is your being here in Bismark an accident? Or . . . did you come here for a reason?"

The tramp hesitated. "Well, it ain't exactly an accident, but I don't think I got a real reason, either. On'y . . . well, before you . . . I mean, before Herb died he talked about comin' out here. He didn't say why, but I got to thinkin' about it and—well, things were pretty bad all summer. We had pretty hard times and Woodley sometimes talked about lookin' up an old friend and gettin' a stake from him . . ."

"O'Hara!"

"I dunno, I ain't so sure that was the name. But I do know that Woodley wanted to come out here to Bismark, so I—well, after he was gone, what with the hard times and winter comin' on . . ."

"You thought you'd take over in Woodley's place. Find the sergeant and shake him down? But if you didn't know his name, how did you expect to find him?"

"Well, how many sergeants has Custer got?"

"You knew he was serving under Custer?"

"Yeah, sure, I told you, didn't I? Down in St. Louis, the sergeant was on recruitin' duty—gettin' fellas to enlist for General Custer. So I figured, I knew somethin' about this sergeant and I'd just kinda ask around and . . ."

But Leach was turning away from him. He stepped to the door and banged on it with his fist. "Marshal, open up!" he cried. "Open up . . ."

BOOTS scraped the floor on the other side of the door and a calm voice retorted: "You prisoners don't stop makin' that racket, you're not goin' to get no supper and it's almost time."

"Marshal," exclaimed Leach. "This is Sergeant Leach. Open up, I want to talk to you . . ."

A key turned in the lock and the door was pushed inwards. Leach started to step through the door, but the lanky Marshal's hand fell to the butt of his sixgun.

"Back up, soldier. I hate to buffalo a man twice in one day."

"I've got to get out of here," said Leach. "You'd no right to arrest me in the first place . . ."

"You know," the Marshal said laconically. "The soldiers always say that to me. I been thinkin' maybe it ain't legal to arrest soldiers . . . not even drunken soldiers that go around town smashin' up saloons . . ."

"I'm at the Fort," Leach said. "First Sergeant Leach, of Troop M . . ."

"Leach of Troop M? Say, you're the lad who saved the troop at Nelson's Island."

"I'm the man who went for help, yes. Now, look, Marshal, it's important that I get back to the Fort at once. You know where to find me. I'm not going to run away . . ."

"That you ain't, on account of you're stayin' right here until you pay—"

"All right," groaned Leach, I'll pay for that damage. I only broke one bottle of whiskey, but I'll pay . . ."

"Oh, that," said the Marshal. "I wasn't thinkin' of that. But this is a fee office, you know. Every time I arrest a man I get two dollars, fifty

. . ."

Leach stared at the marshal. "Two dollars and fifty cents . . .?"

"Yep!"

"You mean, if I pay for that . . .?"

". . . You can go!"

Leach thrust his hand savagely into his pocket, pulled out some bills and forced them into the Marshal's outstretched hand. Then he brushed past the man and hurtled into the Marshal's office, heading for the street door.

"Hey!" the Marshal called after him. "Here's your change . . .!"

But Leach didn't even hear him.

He tore out of the jail and started running across the street, toward the Dakota Palace Saloon, where his horse was still tied to the hitchrail.

He untied the horse and vaulting into the saddle, put the animal into a gallop, out of Bismark. Behind him, the sun was sinking below the horizon.

He kept the horse on the run all the way to the ferry and exclaimed in relief when he saw the scow on his side of the river. He drove the horse aboard and in a few minutes, sent it up the slope on the far side of the river, to the Fort.

IN the Fort he rode swiftly to Troop M barracks and dismounting, ran into the orderly room. He passed through it, into his quarters beyond and got his belt and revolver. Strapping the belt about his waist he plunged out, and strode down a narrow hall to the rear, where several rooms were occupied by the sergeants of Troop M. He burst open the door of the first.

A sergeant, shaving, looked at him in surprise. "Where's O'Hara?"

There were two cots in the room, two wall lockers and chairs. The sergeant looked at the bunk opposite his own. "I don't know where he is, Sergeant."

"He's around somewhere?"

The sergeant hesitated. "No."

"What do you mean, no?" Leach cried. "This is where he sleeps, isn't it? He hasn't got leave and its supper time in a few minutes. Where would he be—the sutler's?"

"No, Sergeant. As a matter of fact, O'Hara didn't sleep here last night. And —well, his gun's gone and his personal belongings and—ninety-three dollars of my money that I kept in my locker."

Leach flinched. "He's gone over the hill?"

"That's what it looks like to me."

Leach began to swear. He strode to the wall locker behind O'Hara's bed and tore it open. It contained an extra uniform, but no shaving kit, no personal possessions. He slammed the door shut and whirled on the sergeant who was wiping the soap from his face.

"Why didn't you report this?"

"I did," replied the sergeant stiffly. "I went to the orderly room three or four hours ago, but you weren't there. I—I told Lieutenant Gregson. I couldn't report it last night, because I didn't know he'd skipped. I thought he might be staying in town overnight, but this afternoon, I needed some money and when I went to look for it, it wasn't there."

"Did O'Hara let drop any hint of his plans?"

"No, but he hasn't been the same since we got back from Nelson's Island. Frankly, Sergeant, he was pretty much put out when you were promoted over his head."

"That's to be expected. But did he ever talk about me, personally?"

"He didn't like you. Said the Seventh wasn't big enough for the two of you."

"Apparently it wasn't." Leach slammed out of the room. Returning to his own quarters he got a towel and some soap and went to the wash room at the rear of the barracks where he

washed himself.

Finished, and noting the long bruise along his temple, put there by the Marshal of Bismark, he returned to the orderly room. He had scarcely entered than the blast of a whistle from the mess hall announced supper. But Leach was in no mood for eating.

The barracks resounded to the noise of troopers hurrying to the mess hall, but Leach remained in his own quarters, until the din subsided. Then he put on his hat and left the barracks.

IT was dark outside, by this time, but there were lights in the sutler's store and Leach walked swiftly to it. He entered and found that the only occupants were the bartender and a corporal from Troop C, who had imbibed sufficient beer to make him unsteady.

"Hi, Sarge," he called. "Have a glassabeer."

"No, thanks."

"Oh, a corporal ain't good enough to drink with a top sergeant, huh? Well, lemme tell you, I was a sergeant myself once. Got busted and now I'm workin' my way back . . ."

Leach made an impatient gesture, as if brushing aside the corporal. He said to the man behind the bar: "Where's Quade?"

"Havin' his supper. Something I can get for you?"

"No. I want to see Quade himself."

Behind Leach, the voice of Molly Quade spoke: "About what?"

Leach turned quickly. Molly stood in the doorway that led to the living quarters of the Quades, behind the store. "I'd like to see your father," he said.

"I'm sure I could take care of your needs," Molly said coolly. "What is it you want—some smoking tobacco? Shaving soap . . .?"

"I want to talk to him," Leach said harshly, "about Sergeant O'Hara!"

She seemed to flinch a little at his bluntness, but her answer came calmly enough. "Are you sure it's my father you want to talk to?"

"Yes." Leach stepped toward her. "Do you mind?"

She hesitated a moment then turned. "If you'll follow me . . ."

He followed her through a small living room, into a combination kitchen and dining room. The sutler was seated at a small table, eating the last of a piece of pie. He looked at Leach in surprise.

"Leach, isn't it? *Sergeant* Leach now, I believe."

"I want to ask you about O'Hara," Leach began, but the sutler cut him off short.

"You want to ask *me* about O'Hara?" What do *I* know about him?"

"You were his best friend."

The sutler snorted. "I'm friends with hundreds of soldiers. Why wouldn't I be? I give them credit, sell them beer and listen to their troubles . . ."

"O'Hara wasn't that kind of a friend."

"Who says he isn't?"

"I do. There was something between you two . . ."

Quade pushed back his chair.. "Now, look here, Leach, I don't know what the devil you're driving at . . . and what's all this *was?* You talk as if—"

"O'Hara's deserted!"

Quade stared at Leach in astonishment. "O'Hara, a deserter? What are you talking about?"

"Just that. He's deserted."

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Molly Quade.

"It's true. He left yesterday." He added viciously, "taking ninety-three dollars of another man's money with him."

Quade sprang to his feet. "Now, you're going too far, Leach, or whatever the devil your name is. I know O'Hara, yes, I know him well. And I know he's not the sort of man who'd take *anything* belonging to another man. All right, maybe he deserted, but if he did, he was driven to it. Yes, he told me—how you hounded him, gave him every dirty job . . ."

"O'Hara was a liar," Leach said remorsely. "A liar, a thief . . . . and a murderer . . .!"

"Get out of here!" roared Quade. "I won't have any man talking like that about a friend of mine, not in my house."

"Quade," said Leach, "did you ever hear of a man named Billy Bligh . . . and Sam Morrison?"

"NO," thundered the sutler. "I never did. I don't know them and I don't know you." He snorted in derision. "O'Hara a murderer! You should see the day you'll ever be one-half the man that O'Hara was. You were jealous of him; by some underhanded conniving you got promoted over his head. You knew you didn't deserve it and you were afraid O'Hara'd get your rank, which he rightfully deserved. You persecuted the man until he couldn't stand it any longer. You forced him to throw away everything he'd gotten in seven years of hard work and you're not satisfied. You want to pursue him some more, put him into military prison . . ."

"If I find O'Hara," Leach said ominously, "he'll not go to prison. It'll be him or me. He tried to kill me a while ago and . . ."

"Rot!" snarled Quade. "I won't hear another word. Get out of here, before I call someone to throw you out . . ."

Leached looked at the sutler, then at his daughter. Her face was white and drawn . . . and cold. He turned and strode to the door. There he stopped and faced the two in the room once more.

"You're pulling out of here, Quade," he said. "You'll probably be seeing O'Hara again. When you do, tell him for me, that I'll catch up with him and that this time I know who he is. "Tell him that."

Then he walked out of the kitchen, through the living room and the store and out upon the parade ground.

In the darkness he walked back to Troop M barracks and discovered that his horse was still tied outside. He went up to the horse and was about to untie it; when he noticed that the light was on in the orderly room and that someone was seated at his desk.

He crossed to the barracks and entered. Lieutenant Gregson got up from Leach's desk. "Oh, here you are, Sergeant. You know about Sergeant O'Hara . . .?"

Leach nodded. "I've just been inquiring about him down at the sutler's."

The lieutenant shook his head. "I can't understand it. We get desertions in the Seventh, although not as many as in some other regiments. But I've never known of a man in his second hitch deserting—and a sergeant, at that!"

"He took ninety-three dollars of Sergeant Plennert's money."

"So Sergeant Plennert told me. It's hard to believe. Frankly, I never warmed up to O'Hara myself, but he wasn't a bad soldier. Rode the men a little too hard perhaps, yet . . ." The lieutenant's face clouded, ". . . he went through the Indian lines with you at Nelson's Island and found the reserve battalion, you'll recall. If you hadn't been just a little faster at the

time . . ."

"O'Hara went through the Indian lines with me," Leach said slowly. "And then he tried to kill me . . ."

"What?" cried Lieutenant Gregson.

I HAD a fight with O'Hara, coming out to Bismark on the train, before I enlisted in the Seventh. I thought he held that against me, but . . . that wasn't the reason he tried to kill me. Lieutenant, when you returned from the hospital you said you'd learned my history, through the newspapers . . . Well, O'Hara was one of the three men who—who killed my fiancee, Helen Alderton!"

"But how could you know that?" cried Gregson. "Those men were never identified . . ."

"I saw one of them," Leach said. "As they rode under the window of Judge Alderton's law office, one of them looked up. His face was registered in my brain. I followed him for nine years. Nine long years, Lieutenant.. I devoted every single minute of every day to just that one task."

"And O'Hara was the man?"

"No, it was a man named Woodley, the weakest of the three men. I—I caught up with him last summer."

"And . . .?"

"I killed him. There were extenuating circumstances: Woodley'd become a common tramp and sneak thief. I'd followed him to Chicago and then lost him. By sheer accident I was on the scene when he tried to pick someone's pocket. There was a hue and cry and I got into the chase. I got to Woodley first and I shot him—with his own gun. Before he died he let it out that his old companions, or at least one of them, was serving in the United States Cavalry . . ."

"And that's why you enlisted in the Seventh?"

"Yes."

Gregson's face grew dark in sudden anger. "Damn it, Leach, I don't like it. The army's no place for private feuds."

"It isn't exactly a private feud. O'Hara's a robber, a fugitive from justice—and a murderer!"

"Just the same, I'm disappointed in *you*, Leach. You're in the army under false pretenses.. You didn't enlist to become a soldier. You got in to find a man . . . and kill him."

"I'll kill O'Hara," Leach said evenly, "I'll kill him as he killed the woman I loved . . . and as he'll try to kill me. As he's already tried. I'll shoot him down like a mad dog."

Lieutenant Gregson banged his fist on Leach's desk. "You'll face a firing squad if you do, Leach. I'll see to it myself. I won't—the army won't—stand for anything like that, no matter what your provocation. If you've any proof that O'Hara's done what you say he has—that he's the man who did those things, you can turn the information over to the civilian authorities. They'll get O'Hara from the army, through legal means."

Lieutenant Gregson broke off and scowled at Leach for a moment. "Dammit, Sergeant, why did you have to tell me these things?"

"Why'd *you* pry into my private affairs?" Leach flared back.

GREGSON smacked his right fist into his left hand. "I'm still the acting-commander of this troop. In view of what you've just told me, I don't see how I can keep you on as first sergeant."

"I didn't ask for the stripes."

"Now, don't try throwing anything like that in my face, Leach. I won't have it. You rated your chevrons. With your service record and your performance at Nelson's Island you de-

served the promotion. And I don't mind saying that you've done a fine job as first sergeant, up to now. It's just this —this personal mess of yours . . ." He suddenly stopped and looked sharply at Leach. "What are your intentions? Are you going after O'Hara? Are you also going to desert?"

"I—I hadn't thought of it."

"You're an old soldier, Leach. No matter what your private reasons, you wouldn't desert from the army in time of war . . ."

"We're not at war."

"If we aren't, I don't know what war is," retorted the lieutenant. "All right, it's an undeclared war, but it's still a war. The Indian Reservation Law made it one. You're not the sort of a man who'd desert in the face of the enemy. All right, Sergeant, get your gear together. You ride in a half hour."

"Where to?"

The lieutenant chuckled grimly. "I came down here this evening to tell you that we've been ordered to supply a half troop to serve as escort for a wagon train. I told Sergeant Plennert, in your absence, that he'd go in command. But there's nothing in regulations says I can't send the top sergeant. So you'll go and Plennert will remain here, as acting first sergeant. You keep your rank, Sergeant, but you're on active duty as of this minute."

Leach looked at the lieutenant for a long moment. "Where's the wagon train headed for?"

"The Black Hills, a place called Deadwood. The government's withdrawn its ban on emigrants and we've got to protect the fools who insist on going into country like that." He chuckled again. "You'll see action, Leach, and if you think it isn't a war we'll be having out here, you'll wonder what peace is like . . ."

HE STOPPED as Sergeant Plennert stepped into the orderly room and saluted.

"The detachment is ready to fall in, sir," the sergeant announced.

"Good. But I've made a change, Sergeant. You'll remain here—as acting first sergeant. Sergeant Leach takes your place as leader of the detachment."

Sergeant Plennert's face remained impassive. "Very good, sir."

He saluted again and about-facing, left the orderly room.

"I'll give you a half hour, Sergeant," Gregson said to Leach. "The wagon train's camped five miles west of Bismark. You'll join it this evening and be ready to move out with them at dawn."

"I'll be ready in five minutes," Leach said.

He strode into his sleeping quarters and quickly assembled his gear. A whistle blasted somewhere in the barracks as he finished packing and when he came out, men were pouring out of the barracks onto the parade ground.

Leach joined the men there, called them to attention and got the reports of three corporals. Not counting himself, there were thirty-two men in the detachment, a little more than half the strength of Troop M.

Mounting his own horse, Leach marched the men to the stables and in a few minutes the detachment was mounted and ready to leave the Fort.

Lieutenant Gregson came out of the darkness then and stepped up to Leach's horse. "I'm sorry I had to talk that way to you, Leach," he said, quietly. "But I happen to be a soldier. The army's first with me. It'll always be."

"I understand, sir."

"I expect you back here."

"I'll be back."

"Good." Gregson held out his hand.

"Good luck."

Instead of taking the hand, Leach saluted. "Thank you, sir." He half turned in his saddle. "Troop, attention! . . . Forward, ho!"

In column of twos, with Leach at the head, the detachment rode out of Fort Abraham Lincoln. Some of the men would never see it again. Too many of them.

IT was a bitterly cold morning, when Leach, sipping coffee beside a tiny fire, was approached by the leader of the wagon train, a huge, black-bearded man of about forty-five.

"You in charge of these soldiers?"

"Yes."

"I'm Kelso, captain of the wagon train. We're ready to pull out."

"Go ahead."

Kelso looked sneeringly around at the several fires over which the troopers were having their breakfasts. "Your men ain't ready wet."

"We'll catch up."

Kelso scowled. "I thought you soldiers were supposed to get up early."

"It was after midnight when we got in last night," Leach retorted. "There was no point in rousing them out at four in the morning. We're only five miles from Bismark and there's no danger for you. So start out and we'll be up with you before you've gone a mile."

'I got sixty-five people in this train," Kelso said. "More'n half of them women and children. It's your job to protect them."

"We'll do our job."

". . . That means you gotta keep close to us all the time. It's a long way to Deadwood and there'll be snow any day. So we gotta start early in the morning and travel late. If your army figures to have its breakfast in bed every morning . . ."

Leach got to his feet. "Kelso, let's have an understanding right at the start. You're captain of the wagon train. Fine. Well, I'm in command of these troopers. I'll give them their orders and make the decisions for them. You do the same for your wagon train."

Kelso glowered at Leach then suddenly turned on his heel and walked back to the wagon train. Leach heard him yelling orders. He heard, too, the cracking of whips and then saw the lead wagons start off.

Leach drained the last of his coffee, washed out his tin cup and spoke to one of the corporals. "Get the men ready."

The corporals began issuing orders and in ten minutes the troop was ready for the saddle. The last wagon of the train was less than a hundred yards distant.

"Mount," Leach ordered.

The troopers swung into saddles and in a moment the detachment was trotting after the wagon train. As he passed each wagon Leach counted it and when he reached the head of the train discovered that there were twenty-four wagons. A sizeable train.

Reaching the head of the train, Leach summoned the corporals and through them got eight men with plains experience. He sent them out as skirmishers, two to the front, two to the left, two to the right and two to fall behind the train and remain at a comfortable distance, to prevent a surprise attack from the rear.

The wagons made good time during the morning and when the noon halt was called, had traveled ten miles. They covered another eight or nine miles in the afternoon and when camp was pitched they were almost twenty-five miles from Bismark and quite a few miles beyond the last settler's

cabin.

Leach now had his second altercation with Kelso, the captain of the wagon train. Kelso called on him. "You're puttin' out enough sentries ain't you?" he demanded.

"I'm putting out sentries, yes," replied Leach. "But so are you. I haven't enough men to guard this large camp properly, every night."

"You've got thirty-two soldiers," blustered Kelso. "More'n we have men in the train."

"I'VE got to keep eight skirmishers out every day," Leach said. "More, as we get into the Indian country. I can't exepect those men to be alert if they have to stand guard at night. And I can't have more than half of my remaining force on guard each night. I think it's up to you to put out a few men at night, at least to watch your livestock."

"We'll do nothin' of the kind," Kelso declared. "You got orders to do the guardin' and you're going to. Our men have to drive their wagons durin' the day and they can't stand up all night, doin' your work."

"Your men can sleep in the wagons during the day, while their wives drive. We haven't got any wagons. I'll furnish ten men for guard duty every night, five of them four hours on, four off. That's the best I can do."

"We'll see about that," Kelso snarled and walked back to the wagons.

Later, however, a quiet man from the wagon train called on Kelso. "Ten troopers for guard duty will be fine," he said. "We'll guard our own livestock."

"Good," said Leach. "My men won't be worth a damn, if I don't keep them in condition."

"I understand," said the emigrant, shaking his head. "Kelso knows the country, which is the only reason we elected him captain, but he's got a hatred for the army that none of us like. If he gets too obstreperous we'll have to elect us a new captain."

Leach himself posted the guards that night. Following the custom of '49 the wagons were formed in a circle, tongue to tail and only two civilian guards were posted inside the circle. But the horse herd and the numerous head of beef that the emigrants were taking along with them, had to graze during the night and they were placed inside of large rope corrals, flimsy enclosures at best. Knowing the tendency of the Indians to stampede the horses before an attack, Leach felt that a substantial guard should be posted among the animals and he saw that a half dozen of the emigrants were detailed for the assignment.

The cavalry horses were kept separate from the emigrants' animals. They were trained and accustomed to the picket line and Leach put only two troopers with them, since the soldiers' camp was nearby. The other three sentries he posted at a considerable distance from the camp, at the points of a large triangle that took in the entire encampment.

All went well that night, however, and the next day the wagon train got an early start and clipped off an easy twenty miles. Indian smoke signals were seen during the day and the campside was carefully chosen.

FIRES were built and the odors of cooking were soon wafted about. Leach, sitting down to his own meager rations, was roused by a sudden shout from the wagon train nearby. He got to his feet and looking eastward saw a large Conestoga wagon coming toward the camp at a good pace.

"I didn't know there were any

stragglers today," he said to a trooper.

"There weren't; this is some damfool travelin' alone."

Leach walked toward the camp. The approaching wagon was close by that time and he suddenly exclaimed softly. There were two people on the seat of the wagon: Sam Quade, the sutler of Fort Lincoln, and his daughter, Molly.

As the wagon came to a stop it was surrounded by a number of the emigrants. "I'd like to join your train," Quade announced to the assemblage. "I traveled most of last night to catch up with you."

"You're the sutler from Fort Lincoln, ain't you?" Kelso asked.

"Yes. I sold my license several days ago. I wasn't planning to leave for Deadwood for a few days, but when I heard that this would probably be the last train leaving before winter, I packed up in a hurry. Left Bismark at noon yesterday."

"You can ride with us," said Kelso, "but we made up a set of rules you got to stick to. We got a cavalry escort and we shouldn't ought to have any trouble."

Leach stepped forward. Quade exclaimed when he recognized Leach. "You're in charge of the soldiers?"

"Yes."

"If I'd known that I think I'd have stayed in Bismark."

The wagon train captain moved toward Quade. "What's the matter with the sergeant?"

"We just don't happen to be friends," Quade replied.

Kelso showed his teeth in a wolfish grin. "Mister," he said, "you're welcome with us."

Leach walked back to the troopers' camp, finished his frugal supper and then went out to check up on the sentries. "You saw those smoke signals today," he cautioned one of the men.

The soldier nodded. "We can't be very far from Nelson's Island."

"About twenty miles. We'll miss it by a dozen miles tomorrow, for we're headed in a more southerly direction, but there'll be Indians from here on, so I don't have to warn you about falling asleep."

Leach returned to the cavalry camp and rolled himself in his blankets, hoping for a couple of hours sleep in the early evening, as he expected to get up several times during the night. But sleep would not come and after awhile he got up and started in the direction of the emigrants' livestock herd.

A shadowy figure detached itself from the circle of wagons and came toward him. A voice that Leach knew called to him: "John! John Leach . . ."

Leach stopped and Molly Quade came up to him. She stopped three feet away and he could just barely make out her features in the reflected light from the campfires.

"I'm sorry, John," she said. "I—I had to tell you."

"Sorry that I'm with the wagon train?" he asked.

She exclaimed softly. "Don't! You know very well what I mean."

LEACH was silent for a moment. Then he said tonelessly: "Yes, I know what you mean and—and *I'm* sorry . . . sorry that there isn't anything in me, except the will to kill two men."

She recoiled. "That's all that your life means . . . killing?"

"It's all that I've lived for these past nine years."

"That's ridiculous, John," she cried. "I—I've asked about you at the Fort. You were an officer during the war; your record was brilliant. General Custer himself cited you and then you

threw it all away for this mad . . . what is it, vengeance? How could any wrong anyone did mean so much to you?"

Leach was silent and Molly took a step closer to him. "Tell me, John, I—I've *got* to know . . ."

"There was a girl," Leach said, barely above a whisper. "We were to be married and then—the day before—she was shot. Oh, she wasn't killed. No, she wasn't that lucky. The bullet paralyzed her and for seven months she lay in bed, unable to move a muscle. I watched her die, slowly, day by day . . ."

"How horrible!" exclaimed Molly, shivering.

"Maybe I died then, too,' 'Leach said. "At least a part of me, the part that made life worthwhile living. I haven't had it in me all these years. All I've had is, all right, you called it vengeance, I call it retribution. It's the only thing that keeps me going. They killed her, those men, and I'll kill them. There were three and there are still two . . . O'Hara and the other man whose name I'll get when I finally face O'Hara for the last time."

"And then?" Molly Quade asked. "What then, John Leach, after you've played God twice more? What, then?"

"I don't know," Leach replied harshly. "Maybe one of them will get me, too. But it'll be the last one. It's *got* to be."

"And what if you don't die? What if you've got to go on living after you've kil—after you've fulfilled your mission? Can you go back and find yourself again? Those lost years."

Leach was moved; for the first time in a long, long while, he knew an emotion other than the one that had so filled his years. "I don't know," he said desperately. "I don't know."

Molly moved away, back toward the circle of wagons. Leach remained where he was, his entire body quivering. He thought that Molly had gone altogether, but then she spoke once more, from a distance of a dozen feet.

"When you know, John, find me . . . and tell me."

Then she was gone.

IN the middle of the next morning, a trooper came galloping back to the wagon train. Leach, at the head of the cavalry detachment, rode out to meet him.

"Indians," the trooper reported. "Me and Osborne flushed a party of them. Six or seven, in war paint."

"Where are they?"

"They went skedaddling when they saw us."

"They saw just the two of you and ran?"

"That's right, Sergeant. But I thought I'd better ride back and tell you."

Leach nodded. "Go back to Osborne, but keep separated, at least a hundred feet. That war party didn't run from you because they were afraid."

"I didn't think so."

"If you sight them again, fire a shot and if they attack you, don't try to fight them off. Fall back. But remember, keep a safe distance from Osborne, so that you can't both be jumped at one time. Keep in sight of each other, though, and the minute one of you doesn't see the other, let go with your gun."

"Right, Sergeant."

The trooper rode off.

A horse came galloping up from the wagon train. Leach, turning in the saddle, saw Kelso, the captain of the wagon train, bearing down on him.

"What's up?" Kelso asked.

"The point sighted Indians," Leach

replied. "Just a half dozen. Not enough to be alarmed."

"Where there's one redskin, you'll find another."

"True, but we've got to expect to see Indians. After all, we're in the heart of their country. I'd be more uneasy if I didn't see any."

Kelso pointed suddenly to the west. "Look, smoke signals! That bunch your men saw is signalling to another bunch."

Leach studied the puffs of smoke that were floating in the sky. Even as he looked, answering puffs went up to the south and west. He shook his head.

"All right, face it," he snapped at Kelso. "You expected you might have to fight when you started out on this trip."

"We'll never make it," Kelso declared. "It's another two hundred miles, a good ten-twelve days. It's suicide to go ahead. You call in your soldiers, we're going back."

He whirled his horse and sent it galloping back to the wagon train.

Leach raised his arm in a signal for the troop to halt. "You can dismount," he said to the soldiers, "but remain on the alert."

Leach himself remained in the saddle. The wagon train had come to a halt and a large group of the emigrants assembled near the lead wagon.

Leach waited ten minutes, then rode down to the group.

"What's the decision?" he asked.

"We haven't arrived at one," Kelso snapped. "Some of these damn fools insist on going ahead."

"I'm going," one of the men declared. "We knew in Bismark that the Indians were hostile. I don't see that the situation has changed any."

"That goes for me, too," another emigrant said. "I expected to have to kill a few Indians and I'm ready for a fight."

"You've never fought Indians," Kelso declared. "You ain't got any idee what it's like. They keep comin' and comin' at you. You kill one and two of them jump up and take his place."

"They won't attack us," a third emigrant put in. "We're too strong. When they see the soldiers they'll keep their distance."

"What do you think, Sergeant?" another man asked. "Will they attack us?"

LEACH shrugged. "I don't know. They might attack, if there's a big enough war party in the neighborhood. But a wagon train's a pretty formidable thing to beat, if it's prepared for a battle. You've got cover and the Indians are in the open."

"Let's put it to a vote," a man exclaimed. "Those who want to go ahead can go and the others can turn back."

"No," said Leach. "My duty's to protect you and I can't break up my force and try to protect two groups. Neither one would be strong enough to fight off any determined attack. I don't care what your decision is; you can go back if you want to or you can go ahead, but you've all got to go together."

"Vote!"

"Vote on it!"

Several minutes more were taken up by acrimonious discussion but then the emigrants finally settled on the vote. Kelso threw a rope on the grass. "All those in favor of going ahead, step over the rope. Those who want to turn back to Bismark stay on this side."

He folded his arms to indicate that he was staying right where he was.

Kelso lost. More than two-thirds of the emigrants stepped across the rope.

The decision was scarcely arrived at than a gun banged somewhere off to the left. Leach whipped his horse about, shot a quick glance over the troop of cavalry and beyond saw both of the left wing skirmishers galloping back toward the wagon train.

"Get ready to fight," Leach shouted over his shoulder, as he put the spurs to his mount.

The animal leaped forward and Leach rode swiftly out to meet the two skirmishers. They were shouting at him before he could distinguish their words and he pulled up his horse ready to turn and run with them.

Then their words came: "Sioux! A million of 'em . . .!"

Leach saw them then, just topping a low knoll less than a mile away. He whipped out his Colt and fired three times into the air, a signal for the other skirmishers to come in to the main troop body.

The two skirmishers came tearng up and Leach turned with them and rejoined the troop. From there, Leach studied the charging Indians. They were strung out along the prairie, a good sixty or seventy, perhaps more. And off to the right, from the west, came another band. The second group was at a little further distance, however.

Leach made a quick decision. "Get the horses into the wagon circle," he ordered the troop. "It's going to be a tough fight and we want as many of them spared as possible."

The emigrants were already forming a circle of wagons. It would be completed in a minute or two—but that would not be soon enough. The first detachment of Indians would hit them before that time.

Leach had to stop the Indians, at least long enough for the emigrants to complete their circle. Galloping the troop back to the emigrants' wagons, he brought them to a quick halt and yelled out:

"Dismount! Horse holders take the mounts and lead them into the circle, and then return here at once . . . Troop attention!"

EVERY fourth man caught the reins of three horses in addition to his own, according to the cavalry drill, and the other troopers quickly formed a double rank, facing the first group of charging Indians, now less than a half mile distant.

"Prepare to fight on foot," Leach ordered. "At intervals, take distance . . . Move!"

As if they were on the parade grounds the double rank melted into a single line, each man ten feet from the next one.

"Down!" roared Leach.

The men dropped to the ground, carbines thrust out before them. Leach went down to his knees at the far right of the line, facing the men.

"Hold your fire until I give the order," Leach shouted, remembering the devastation created in a similar situation at Nelson's Island.

The Indians were swooping down in a wide half circle, that would catch the wagon train in a pincers. Leach, swiveling, saw the second horde of Indians, now about a mile distant. They would hit from thirty to sixty seconds after the first wave. That was better than a simultaneous attack, but still, if Leach's men failed to stop the first attack quickly enough, it could be disastrous to not only the soldiers, but the emigrants.

As Leach watched the two skirmishers from the rear pounded up. He ordered them to drive their horses into the enclosure. As they charged through the eight troopers who had

taken the horses inside, came pouring out.

Leach ordered them to take up a kneeling position behind his first line of prone men and instructed a corporal to watch for the other skirmishers and as they came up to join the kneeling row. The circle of wagons he saw was now complete, but the emigrants were by no means ready to join in the fight. They were dashing about, taking care of the women and children, setting up kegs and boxes for shelter. The brunt of the first attack would fall upon the cavalrymen.

And now Leach could no longer take his eyes from the advancing Indians. They were three hundred yards distant, already firing irregularly. And whooping.

Two hundred yards. A hundred.

"Get ready!" Leach shouted above the din and thrust his own revolver out.

"Fire!"

A sheet of flame and thunder rolled from the line of troopers stretched out on the grassy sod.

The result of the volley was fearful: Charging horses turned complete somersaults, throwing their riders and in some cases crushing them with their heavy carcasses. Other Indians, torn from the backs of their mounts, were trampled by horses. But those Indians not hit by the blast of death were coming at such terrific speed that they could not pull up short in front of the soldiers. The second volley from the smaller group of soldiers in the second line, brought down several Indians. And then the men on the ground, having levered fresh cartridges into chambers, let go with another round, almost in the faces of the charging Indians and horses.

ALMOST two-thirds of that first wave of Indians went down, half their horses were dead or wounded. Panic seized the survivors of the charge and in their mad efforts to get away, they swarmed in every direction. The troops came up from the ground and blasted away individually at them.

Leach, roaring at the top of his lungs to be heard over the tremendous din, finally swerved the soldiers.

"The right," he cried, "face to the right."

And only just in time. The second wave of Indians, coming from the other direction, were already within a hundred yards. Their speed was diminishing, however, for they had noted the havoc of their tribesmen's charge.

"Load!" roared Leach. "Fire at will!"

The Indian charge broke, rather it suddenly swerved from a head-on charge to a flanking one, the Indians galloping alongside the soldiers and the encircled wagon train.

They offered beautiful targets and the soldiers picked off men with a vengeance. The Indians fired, too, but notoriously bad marksmen, their aim was not improved by being on horseback.

A dozen Indians went down from the second wave and then the Indians were out of rifle range. Circling, they went off to the left and mingled with the survivors of the first disastrous charge.

Leach made a quick survey of his men. Two were down, one dead, the other badly wounded. Three of those standing had suffered minor wounds. But those were the only casualties. The Indians . . . keeping his distance from them, Leach counted more than thirty, dead or wounded on the ground and there were undoubtedly other wounded, who had been able to ride or run off.

A half dozen emigrants, rifles ready, came plunging out of the wagon circle.

"Gawd!" cried one of them as he surveyed the carnage. "You practically

wiped them out."

Leach kept his eyes on the Indians who had assembled a quarter of a mile away. As nearly as he could judge there were sixty or seventy survivors.

The train captain, Kelso, came running up. He saw one of the Indians on the ground, trying to crawl away, threw up his gun and fired. The Indian dropped.

"That baby'll never scalp anyone," he exulted.

"You'll shoot no more wounded," Leach snapped.

"What the hell you talkin' about?" Kelso snarled. "We're goin' out there and make sure every damn one of them is dead. It's what they'd do to us, if it was the other way around. And they'd do more'n that."

"But *you* won't," Leach said. "What you'll do is get the wagons rolling again. The Indians want their dead and wounded. They've had enough; there won't be another attack."

Kelso started to bluster, but a couple of the emigrants silenced him. "That's enough, Kelso," one of them declared. "After what the sergeant's done here with his soldiers, he can tell us anything he wants and we'll do it."

To be on the safe side, however, Leach waited ten minutes. Then, when it was plain that the Indians were not going to attack again, the wagon train was put into motion.

It traveled only a mile when Leach called it to a halt and had it prepared for an attack. Then he rode back to the battlefield, with a half dozen men. He found only dead horses. All the Indian dead and wounded were gone. And so were the live Indians.

Leach led his detachment back to the emigrant train and it was once more put into motion, traveling until sundown before halting for the night.

A strong guard was posted that night, but the camp was unmolested. Indians were sighted the next day, but only small groups who kept their distance. A raid on the horse herd by a half dozen young bucks was beaten off during the night and that was the last shot that was fired for the rest of the journey to Deadwood.

NINE days later, after a forced march, the emigrant train entered the canyon in which the Black Hills mining town was located.

Leach picked a site at the edge of town and had his men pitch camp. Before the campfires were lighted, a man from the Wells Fargo Agency sought out Leach.

"Got a letter here for you," he said. "Came in on the stage from Yankton today."

Leach opened the letter and discovered that it was an order from Lieutenant Gregson of M Troop, directing him to establish an outpost accessible to Deadwood for the purpose of maintaining military protection for the inhabitants of Deadwood and vicinity. Lieutenant Brown would arrive within a few days to assume command.

Leach swore softly when he read the orders. He had expected to start back to Bismark the following morning.

He read the order to the troopers. Grumbling was prompt and unanimous. None of the men relished the idea of remaining in Deadwood throughout the winter. Bismark was bad enough when the icy winds howled over the Dakota prairies, but it had a railroad. Furloughs could be obtained. And there was a large Army Fort at Bismark with entertainment, recreation. That could be obtained at Deadwood, true, but it was a boom mining camp and the pay of a soldier would provide about one evening's entertainment a month.

Leach listened to the complaining

but made no comment himself. A light snow had already fallen that day and the Black Hills would soon be in the grip of winter. The search for O'Hara had received a setback and if he were not relieved of command soon it might well be spring before he could resume it. But then, he had already been nine years on the trail. One more would not matter too much.

Leach had a frugal supper at the camp, then walked into the town. He turned in at one of the general stores and arranged for the purchase of a number of axes and saws, then from there proceeded to the office of the town marshal, who turned out to be a notorious gunfighter from Kansas, recently turned marshal. His name was Selby and he was a youthful, round-faced man with a cherubic face.

"You're the man just brought in the emigrant train," he said to Leach. "Had a rather rough time of it, I hear."

"It could have been worse."

The Marshal grinned wickedly. "You soldiers going to hang around here for awhile?"

"I have orders to establish a barracks."

"Good enough, but I don't mind telling you right now that soldiers are no better than anyone else. They get drunk and start fights, I'll lock 'em up as fast as anybody."

"You can argue that point with Lieutenant Brown, who'll be in command. He'll be here in a few days." Leach nodded toward the reward posters tacked to the wall. "Been a lawman long?"

"Who, me? I'm Dick Selby. Mean to say you've never heard of me?"

"The name sounds familiar."

The Marshal snorted. "I should hope it does." He shrugged. "This is the first time I've worn tin. They couldn't get anybody else to take the job, so I said I wouldn't mind taking a crack at it. Not a bad idea. Pays well."

"It's a fee office?"

"Partly. A hundred a month and two dollars for every arrest. But I got a guarantee of two hundred a month, which ain't bad money these days."

LEACH, thinking of his own salary, nodded agreement. "I suppose, this being a boom town and people coming in all the time, you don't get to know many of them."

Selby shrugged. "They come and go all the time, but the last couple of weeks they've thinned down pretty much. Nobody wants to get caught in the snow—not with a million Indians around, lookin' for scalps. What'd you have in mind?"

"Why, I was wondering if you happened to know a man who might have come this way during the past week or so. Big, strapping fellow, about thirty-six, thirty-seven . . ."

"Deserter?"

"Well, yes."

"A sergeant, maybe?"

Leach's eyes narrowed. "He's been here?"

"I missed on him," said Selby. "It's fifty dollars they pay for deserters, isn't it?"

Leach made an impatient gesture. "When was he here?"

Selby stepped to the door, opened it. "Come along."

Leach followed the Marshal out of the office and across the street to a log cabin store, which bore a sign: "The Golden Emporium."

Selby pointed to the window. "See what I mean?"

In the window, occupying the center position and surrounded by various other types of clothing, was a complete cavalryman's uniform. Sergeant's chev-

rons and a hash mark were on the sleeve of the blouse.

"Otto put it in the window yesterday morning," Selby said.

Leach stepped to the door of the store and opening it, entered. Selby followed.

A balding, heavy-set man behind a counter was trying to sell a Prince Albert to a buckskin-clad, bearded man. "Otto," called Selby, from just inside the door, "come here."

"Just a minute, Sheriff," replied Otto. "I got a customer."

"No, you ain't," retorted the man in buckskins. "I said I wanted some store clothes, but damned if I'll wear one a them long-tailed preacher's coats."

"Preacher, nothing," the storekeeper exclaimed. "I bought this Prince Albert from a whiskey salesman who drew to an inside straight. In St. Louis and Chicago, bankers wear coats like this . . ."

"Otto!" called Selby. "I said, come here."

Otto shot a nervous glance at the Marshal, then looked quickly back at his reluctant customer. He hesitated, then licking his lips, said to the buckskin-wearer: "Don't go 'way. I'll make you a nice price on this garment." He came quickly toward Selby and Leach. "Yes, Sheriff, what can I do for you?"

"That soldier suit in the window, Otto," the Marshal began.

Otto clapped his hand to his forehead. "More trouble, now?"

"No trouble," said Leach. "Of course you're selling government property . . ."

"No, no, I bought it from a discharged soldier."

"A deserter."

"Ah, no, he was discharged. Look on the suit—it's got one of them little stripes on the sleeve that means he's finished one enlistment, already . . ."

A HASH mark," Leach said. "Yes, he was in the second enlistment. But he didn't finish it. He desterd."

The proprietor's eyes threatened to bulge from his forehead. "All right, I take the loss; I don't want no trouble with the army. Or the government. I am out six dollars. You take the suit, and we call it quits. Yes?"

"I'm not interested in the uniform. I want the man," Leach said.

"Sure, sure, but I don't know where he is. I never saw him before. He came in here the night before last and we made this-here deal. I allowed him three, I mean six dollars on the uniform against a fine Prince Albert coat and the best broadcloth trousers you ever saw. Scarcely worn . . ."

"What color?"

"Black. Well, kinda black, you know that dark grey pattern, with a darker stripe in it. I charged him only two dollars for the trousers. Eight dollars, I mean, ten dollars for the coat. And only a dollar for the hat. An excellent derby, that fitted him like as if it was custom made."

"Prince Albert, dark broadcloth pants, derby hat," Leach enumerated. "What else?"

"What else would he wear with that? A fine broadcloth shirt—"

"White?"

"Naturally. And a grey cravat and stiff collar."

"Reg'lar gambler's layout," observed Selby, the Marshal.

"That's it!" exclaimed Otto eagerly. "Now you mention it, sure. I sold him a derringer, a fine double-barreled little gun you could hide in the palm of your hand. Like the gamblers carry."

"Sounds like your man's going into business," Selby said to Leach. "Card business."

"He's still got his Colt and a Spencer carbine," Leach replied. "And a

horse belonging to the United States government."

"All of which he needs, if he's traveling on."

"Where would you travel from here?"

"Me?"

"If you were figuring to hide out."

The Marshal shrugged. "Most anywhere. South to Cheyenne or Laramie . . ."

"There are Army camps at both places."

"Well, Nebraska, Ogallala. Or down to Kansas. They do a right smart amount of card playing in Wichita and Dodge City. On the other hand, if a fella really wanted to skip, and still wanted to earn his way, there's the diggings in Montana. Deer Lodge, Virginia City. And from there it's only a running jump to Oregon. Only, a man'd be crazy to head in that direction, with the Sioux out the way they are."

LEACH'S forehead creased in thought. "O'Hara's not a timid man, I'll say that for him."

"A man deserts from the Army's got nerve, or he's a fool," the Marshal said. "Me, I've had people lookin' for me in my time, but never the United States Government. I wouldn't like it if they was after me."

Leach said to Otto, the proprietor of the store: "Did he let drop any hint of which direction he was going to travel?"

"He didn't say he was goin' to travel."

Leach hesitated a moment, then nodning, turned toward the door. Selby was at his heels as he left the store.

Next door was a blacksmith shop and livery stable. The smith was still banging away at his anvil as Leach and the Marshal entered.

"I'm looking for a deserter," Leach said to the smith, "a man with a government horse; I thought he might have come in here for a new set of shoes."

"He was," said the smith. "I saw the government brand on the horse and I wondered about it, but—" looking steadily at the Marshal, "it ain't always healthy to ask a man about a horse."

"You shoulda come and told me," the Marshal said chidingly.

"Maybe I should, but I didn't. He stabled the horse here two nights. Gave the name of Morrison . . ."

"Morrison!" exclaimed Leach.

The blacksmith shrugged. "A phoney . . ."

"No—his real name. He's been using a false one all the time he was in the Army." He frowned. "From anything he said, did you get any idea of which way he intended to travel?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. He asked about the trail to Cheyenne . . ."

"Then you can eliminate Cheyenne," Selby declared.

"Not necessarily. Morrison, or O'Hara, couldn't have had the least idea that I'd be here looking for him."

"He could have guessed that *somebody* from the Army'd be after him."

Leach shook his head. "The Army doesn't look for a man that hard. It notifies the authorities in his home town, and that's about all. Out here we may make an immediate search if we think there's a chance of getting the man in a day or two, but otherwise . . ."

"Yet *you're* figuring on going after him?" Selby looked at Leach sharply. "Something personal?"

Leach did not reply to that. Selby nodded his head thoughtfully. "Morrison," he said softly. "Morrison and Bligh . . ."

Like a rattlesnake striking, Leach's

hand shot out and gripped the shoulder of the Marshal. "Where'd you hear those names?"

Selby struck savagely at Leach's hand on his shoulder. "Don't ever grab me like that!" he snarled.

"What do you know about Morrison and Bligh?" Leach asked, his eyes blazing.

"Nothing," replied Selby. "Nothing much. Only the names registered. I've got them in the back of my mind. But it seems to be there was a third name. Morrison, Bligh and . . . and . . ."

"Woodley! Herb Woodley."

"Morrison, Bligh and Woodley. Yeah, I remember them now. Years ago. Must be eight-ten years ago. I holed up with 'em once. Down in the Indian Nations. They were on the dodge after a bank job they'd pulled somewhere . . ."

"In Missouri," Leach said.

"Could be. Anyway, the job didn't pay off. Except in getting a bunch of law after them. Somebody got hurt."

"Somebody got hurt," Leach said grimly. He made an impatient gesture. "You saw them . . ."

"Once or twice," Selby coughed. "I was kinda incognito myself, you might say. Result of a little mistake in Texas. Blew over in a little while . . ."

"Get to the point, man!"

"What's the hurry? This was six-seven years ago . . ."

"Nine, almost ten!"

"That long ago? Mm, wouldn't hardly think so. But I guess you're right. I had that trouble with Ben Wilson in '68 and this was before then."

"Bligh," Leach gritted, "Bligh and Morrison, tell me about them."

"What about Woodley; aren't you interested in him?"

"No, he's dead. And I know something about Morrison. Bligh, what sort of a man was he? What'd he look like?"

"BLIGH," Selby repeated. "Let me see, he was the oldest one of the three. I was only a squirt then myself, and Bligh looked pretty old. Close to forty. Yeah, I 'member, he was the boss of the outfit."

"You're sure he was the leader?"

"No question about it. Morrison started to shoot off his mouth once and the old man shut him up pretty quick. Said it was Morrison's itchy finger that'd got them into the trouble."

"So it was Morrison, after all!" exclaimed Leach.

"You seem to have a personal grudge against this Morrison."

"I have. And Bligh."

"But not Woodley?"

"I told you Woodley was dead."

"How'd he die?"

"I killed him. Oh, don't worry, it was all legal. Write to the Chicago police. But I won't promise that Morrison's death will be a legal one, when I catch up with him."

"When, or if?"

"When, because I'll get him."

Selby nodded thoughtfully. "I guess maybe you will." He frowned. "Sure you're a gen-u-wine cavalry sergeant? You been talkin' like a detective all evening."

"I'm not a detective."

"I'd hate to have you on my trail if you were. In fact, I'm gettin' to feel a little sorry for this-here Morrison. Nine years ago and you're still after him. Hell, they forgot that little trouble I had down in Texas in three or four months. And they never bothered me in Wichita when I went there, only a year after the Wilson business. A memory like yours isn't a good thing. For the other guy, or you, for that matter."

Leach glowered at the Marshal and walked out of the blacksmith shop. Selby watched him go and shook his head.

FROM the smithy, Leach crossed to a two-story log building which had a sign: "Hotel" over the doorway. Leach went into the tiny lobby. A grey-whiskered man was behind a counter, scowling at an open ledger.

"Evening', captain," he greeted Leach. "Got a nice room left."

"I'm camped outside of town," Leach said, "but I want to ask you about a man who may have stayed here a day or two ago. Morrison . . ."

The hotel man turned a page and put a stubby finger on an entry. "Here it is, Samuel Morrison, Kansas City. Checked out yesterday morning . . ."

"Did he say where he'd be going?"

"Believe he said somethin' about going home. Home's Kansas City, it says here. Say, wait a minute, he left a letter here for a man. It was picked up only a half hour ago . . ."

"By who?"

"Emigrant. Man named Quade."

"Quade came in asking for the letter?"

"Well, not exactly. He's staying here at the hotel; him and his daughter. Got two rooms."

"But he *did* ask for the letter?"

"Yes and no. He was writing his name here on the register and I was lookin' on and mentioned I had a letter here for a man named Quade. Sam Quade. He grabbed it out of my hand . . ."

"What room's Quade occupying?"

"Two rooms, the best in the place. Upstairs, Number One and Two . . . Hey . . .!"

But Leach was already heading for the stairs. He climbed them swiftly and reaching a narrow hall on the second floor, struck a match and looked for the numbers on the doors.

One match went out and he lit another and then found Room 2. A thread of light showed under the door. Leach banged on it, with his fist.

"Who is it?" asked the voice of Molly Quade.

Leach winced. "I want to talk to Sam Quade."

"He's in Number . . ." began Molly, then stopped. Leach heard a quick step inside the room, then the door was pulled open.

"You!" Molly exclaimed.

"I was looking for your father," Leach said evenly.

Her eyes went to the room next door and even as she looked the door was opened and Sam Quade stepped out into the hall.

"Here, what's this?" Quade growled. Then he recognized Leach. "What do you want with me?"

"I want to ask you some questions."

"I've got no answers for the likes of you," Quade snapped. "I thought I'd seen the last of you."

"You're going to see more of me than you like," Leach retorted. "O'Hara left a letter here for you."

"What of it?"

"I want to see that letter."

Quade snorted. "Anything else you'd like from me? My money, maybe? You've got just as good a chance of getting it."

"Quade," Leach said ominously, "I'm through bandying words with you. O'Hara's a deserter from the United States Army. By helping him escape you're an accessory and subject to arrest."

Quade's jaw became slack. "You're crazy! You can't arrest me. You're nothing but a damn sergeant . . ."

IN the absence of a United States Marshal, I'm the representative of the United States Government in this vicinity. Let me assure you that I know the law—I was once an attorney. If you don't produce that letter and answer my questions, so help me, I'll place you under arrest and take you back to Fort Lincoln in irons . . ."

"You go to hell!" Quade cried hoarsely.

"Dad!" exclaimed Molly plaintively. "Please . . . he means it. For some reason he's got it in for you and he'll leave no stone unturned . . ."

"Yes," snapped Quade, grasping at the straw thrown him by his daughter. "You've had it in for me ever since you found I was a friend of O'Hara's. You're persecuting me . . ."

"You can tell that to the Federal Court," Leach said coldly. "But right now, I want that letter . . ."

"I haven't got it."

"I don't believe you," Leach replied flatly. He made a movement toward the former sutler and Quade leaped back into the doorway of Room Number 2. Leach crowded forward, followed him into the room.

Quade, seeing that Leach was pressing for a showdown, suddenly rushed for a revolver that reposed in a holster on the bed. He got his hands on it, then Leach, springing into the room, gripped his shoulder, whirled him about and tore the gun from his fist.

Behind Leach, Molly Quade came running into the room. She sprang between the two men. "Father!" she cried. "Don't fight him—he'll kill you . . ."

"Maybe I will at that," Leach snarled. "It depends what it says in O'Hara's letter . . ."

"Damn you!" cried Quade. "Damn you to hell. Here—read the letter . . ."

He thrust a big hand into a pocket, brought out a crumpled envelope and thrust it into Leach's hand. Leach snatched the letter and stepped back, so that the light from the wall lamp fell on him.

He smoothed out the envelope, noted the inscription on it: *"Sam Quade, Deadwood. Hold Until Called For."*

There was a single sheet of paper in the envelope. On it was scrawled:

"Sam:—

I'm heading for the place we talked about. I'll wait for you there.

Dennis O'Hara."

A wave of disappointment swept over Leach. Hope had been so strong in him a moment ago. He put down the letter.

"Where?" he demanded of Quade. "Where's this place?"

"New York," snarled Quade. "Or London, England. Take your choice."

There was a heavy step out in the hall and then a quiet voice spoke: "What's the trouble here?"

It was Selby the Marshal. Quade, seeing the badge on the man's vest, turned eagerly on him: "Marshal, I demand you arrest this man. He forced his way into my room and held me up . . ."

"Mmm," said Selby, "that's a rather serious charge."

"It's a lie," Leach snapped. Then he took a quick step toward the Marshal. "Selby, you said you'd met Bligh and Morrison, down in the—I mean, years ago. Look at this man. Look at him closely . . . have you ever seen him before?"

SELBY looked sharply at Leach, then came forward. He surveyed Quade for a long time, then looked inquiringly at Leach.

"Who's he supposed to be?"

Leach groaned. "Look at him again,

try to imagine him nine years younger . . . without a beard . . .!"

"What the devil are you driving at, Leach?" cried Quade.

Selby stared again at Quade and slowly shook his head.

"No," he said, "I've never seen him before."

"Bligh," Leach said desperately. "He's Billy Bligh . . . isn't he?"

"Maybe," said Selby, "but not the Bligh I met. I'd know *him* anywhere —nine years or no." He grinned crookedly. "I told you we holed up together for a spell."

"You're sure, man?"

"I'm sure. This isn't Billy Bligh . . . or Sam Morrison."

Leach was crushed. He dropped the letter and stepping around Selby, headed for the door. But the Marshal called to him: "Sergeant, we haven't settled this little business here."

Leach stopped in the doorway. "Forget it."

"Can't," said Selby. "Landlord downstairs complained of a racket up here and this—this man says you broke in and tried to hold him up."

"Yes," Quade said eagerly, "that's right. I demand you arrest him, Marshal . . ."

Then Molly Quade took a hand. "It's all a misunderstanding, Marshal. Father doesn't mean it."

Quade shot a quick glance at his daughter, then hesitated. Finally, he sighed: "All right, forget it."

"Sure," Selby said, "only I can't. I'm the Marshal and . . ."

"You're not arresting me, Selby!" Leach snapped.

"I told you, soldier or not . . ."

"Don't try it, Selby," Leach said flatly. "I've got thirty-two soldiers who'll tear down your jail."

Selby's eyes glowed, but he made no move toward Leach and the latter suddenly stepped through the door and started for the stairs. He clumped heavily down to the lobby, where the hotel-keeper winced when he saw him. But Leach, without speaking to him, walked out of the hotel.

Returning to the trooper's encampment, he posted a couple of guards and rolled into his blankets.

THE next day, Leach took the troop to a forest of burned-over trees, from which Deadwood had originally received its name. The men carried the saws and axes that Leach had purchased, on requisition, from the store the night before.

He put the men to felling trees and cutting them into building lengths. When some of the logs were ready, he dispatched troopers back to the camp for horses and soon they were hauling logs to the site Leach had selected for a barracks.

On the second day the men began raising the logs for a two-story building, some twenty by forty feet in size. The walls were up by the evening of the third day, when Lieutenant Brown, second Lieutenant Brown, newly assigned to Troop M, arrived in Deadwood with an escort of eight men.

He introduced himself to Leach and praised him for the work on the barracks. "You didn't lose any time, Sergeant. Good. Good. It'll make a snug place for the winter."

"The troop's wintering here, sir?"

"The men that are here, yes. The rest stay with the regiment at Fort Lincoln. But they'll be out this way in the spring, you can count on that."

"But what about me?"

"You stay here. Lieutenant Gregson said that since two-thirds of the troop was here, he thought it best that the First Sergeant be with them." He hesitated. "I'll be frank, Sergeant; Lieu-

tenant Gregson told me a bit about you." He added quickly: "He thought you might, ah, act somewhat rashly and he said to tell you that he considered this post to be in the enemy's territory. In other words, this is active duty."

"I understand," Leach said. "And I'll assure you, I have no intentions of deserting." Under his breath he added: "Not now."

Which was true. O'Hara was gone. North, south, east or west. Leach didn't know. But Sam Quade would be joining O'Hara. But not for awhile, for the day before, Quade had bought a store in Deadwood City, a general merchandise store. He intended to winter in Deadwood.

Very well, Leach would winter here, too. And in the spring, when Quade left, Leach would be following him.

THE winter passed in Deadwood. Not without incident, for the Black Hills, in spite of an unusually severe winter and heavy snowfall, were alive with rumors and scares. A winter military campaign was talked about in the newspapers.

Lieutenant Brown's command was alerted several times, actually received marching orders once, although they were countermanded before the troop could move out.

An expedition was being assembled to the north and west, up in Montana Territory. It was supposed to sweep eastward, down into Wyoming and Dakota. And in the east the Seventh Cavalry was being reinforced. In spring it would move west. Between it and the command in the west, would be the hostiles, the Sioux and Cheyennes, who had refused to go to their reservations.

General Terry was to command the whole. Under him, in the west, was General Sully and in the east, well, who else could command the Seventh but Longhair himself? Brevet Major General George Armstrong Custer, Lieutenant-Colonel of the Seventh Cavalry, which had already made its mark in Indian fighting.

Only . . . Custer was in Washington. Somehow he had become involved in the trial of the Secretary of War. He had long been an enemy of Belknap, Grant's secretary, and he had volunteered testimony against him.

Newspapers trickled into Deadwood. Custer was in trouble. He had stepped on the toes of the President himself. He was facing a court-martial—the second in his Army career. His testimony against Belknap had fizzled; things Custer had said to the court, and to the press, for Custer could never be still in the presence of a newspaperman, had offended Grant.

The seventh would fight that summer, but it would fight without Custer.

The balance of Troop M of the Seventh Cavalry came to Deadwood. The troop was swelled to full wartime strength and was once more commanded by Captain Holterman, at last recovered from his wounds of the fight at Nelson Island. Lieutenant Gregson was the first lieutenant of the troop and there was another new second lieutenant, Lieutenant Lacy.

Little Fiore sported a set of corporal's chevrons and Cecil Potts, the English soldier of fortune, wore the broad yellow stripes of a sergeant.

Fiore, Potts and Leach celebrated the reunion in a saloon in Deadwood. Fiore picked a fight with a drunken mule-skinner and got whipped, whereupon Potts took over Fiore's fight and beat the mule-skinner. A table and a couple of chairs, not to mention some glasses, were broken in the fight.

"There go my stripes," Potts lamented.

Selby, the Marshal, came into the

saloon, summoned by a bartender. He surveyed the damage and cocked an eye at Leach, who was leaning against the bar.

"Count me in—they're my friends," snapped Leach.

"S'all right," Selby retorted. "I just want to see that Wolfe doesn't pad his bill for damages. About fourteen dollars, I'd say, wouldn't you?"

Leach looked at the Marshal curiously. "That's all?"

"What else do you expect?"

"No arrests?"

Selby spread out his hands, palms down. "I ain't got the authority to arrest soldiers."

"You were going to take it last fall."

"I was new in the game then. Besides . . ." he paused. "I'm quittin' in a couple of days."

"You're resigning your office?"

"Yep. Job's all right in winter, but it'll be summer soon and I'd like to move around again. Thought I might go back to Kansas."

LEACH, half-drunk a few minutes ago, suddenly seemed oddly sober. He left the saloon with his friends and went to another, where he had three more beers. They had no effect on him.

He finally said to Potts: "There's no point in me drinking, I can't feel a thing."

"Do you have to feel anything?" Potts demanded. "Can't you just drink for the fun of it?"

"I drink for the effect," Leach said. "I don't like the taste of the stuff. I'm going back to the barracks and go to bed."

Fiore and Potts protested, but Leach left them in the saloon. Outside, the sky was studded with a million stars and the narrow street that followed the canyon in which Deadwood was built was almost as bright as day.

Leach, crossing to get to the side on which the barracks was built, saw a man come out of a darkened store. It was Selby the Marshal, and the store was the one that Sam Quade had bought in the fall.

"Been visiting the Quades?" Leach asked.

Selby stopped and in the moonlight, Leach could see his habitual crooked grin. "Be blind if I wouldn't. That Molly gal's all right."

"I thought gunfighting was your trade, Selby?"

"Now, Leach, you're not trying to pick a fight with me, are you?"

"I don't think there've been many friendly words between us, have there?"

"You've given me the rough edge of your tongue pretty often this past winter," Selby said evenly. "I've taken it and I'm not a man who dodges a fight. But I'll not fight a soldier."

"Patriotic?"

"Not necessarily. I just don't want any trouble."

"You didn't used to walk out of your way to avoid it."

"That was before I . . ." Selby broke off. "What are you trying to do —bait me?"

"You started to say before you . . . something or other? Before you fell in love?"

"Stop it, Leach."

"Or, before you struck it rich, Selby? Is Quade paying you for protection?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I asked you once if Quade was a man you'd known before. You said he wasn't, but I've been watching you all winter, Selby. You've been in Quade's place a good many times and as a result of it, you've changed. You *dodge* fights, Selby."

"Go to hell," snapped Selby and

walked off.

Leach remained standing in the middle of the street and watched Selby walk to his office and disappear inside. Then Leach walked back to the troop barracks.

CAPTAIN HOLTERMAN was seated in the small orderly room, reading some dispatches that had apparently arrived only a short time ago. He looked up as Leach entered.

"It won't be long, Sergeant," he said, shaking his head. "Nelson's Island will seem like a barroom brawl before this summer's over. He picked up an order from Fort Lincoln. "And still they want to travel through that country."

"Who, sir?"

"A party of emigrants has asked for an escort to the Montana gold fields. I've been ordered to give them a dozen men. As if twelve soldiers would be of any use. I'm tempted to refuse the escort. Just throwing away the lives of good troopers that we might need later." He pursed his lips. "What about Sergeant Potts?"

"He's a good man, sir."

"Wounded at Nelson's Island, wasn't he?"

"Yes, sir, but he's all right now. Only . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, Potts is my friend, sir, and . . ."

"Every man in the troop is *my* friend," Captain Holterman said. "I've got to send somebody and Potts is a veteran. When he comes in you might tell him that he can pick his own men. They start tomorrow morning."

"From here?"

"Yes, of course."

"I didn't know a train was forming in Deadwood."

"It's a pretty small train. A dozen wagons. Evidently planned for some time, as they wrote to Fort Lincoln for the escort." The captain sighed and putting down the dispatches got to his feet. "If Sergeant Potts isn't in his quarters, you'd better send out a man to bring him in." He winked. "He'll need a bit of rest."

"Yes, sir."

The captain went out and Leach frowned at the door. Potts was a good soldier, but he was reckless. The wagon train was a small one, too. It wouldn't carry many rifles and the way the Indians were out this summer . . .

Leach sighed and glanced at the papers on his desk. A name leaped out from the top sheet. Sam Quade. It was on the order for the wagon train escort: "To escort Sam Quade and party . . ." the order read. To Virginia City, Montana.

Leach seated himself at the desk and for long moments stared sightlessly at the wall beyond. He had reached the crossroads of his life. His future depended upon which road he took. He knew well the consequences, but even as he thought of it, he knew, too, that there was only one choice he could make. The wrong one, yes, but for Leach, the only one.

The years had been too long, too bitter.

HE got to his feet and leaving the barracks, walked back into the town. He found Potts and Fiore still in the saloon.

"Cecil," he said to Potts, "get back to the barracks."

"What the hell for?"

"Because you're getting up at dawn to take out a party of emigrants."

"Who, me?"

"Captain Holterman's orders. You take twelve men for an escort. Right through the Indian country into Montana."

Potts leered drunkenly at Leach. "You're kidding?"

"You won't think so this time tomorrow."

Potts still refused to believe, but Leach persisted and finally, with the aid of Fiore dragged his friend out of the saloon and back to the barracks. He saw him fall on his cot, then went to his own quarters.

Quickly he got his few personal things together, rolled them into a blanket and got extra ammunition for both his carbine and sixgun. Then, sighing heavily, he left the barracks and went to the stables where the mounts of Troop M were quartered. There was a soldier on guard there, but he did not question Leach. Instead he helped him saddle his horse.

A few minutes after midnight, Leach rode out of Deadwood.

DAWN found Leach huddled over a tiny fire, a dozen miles from Deadwood. From where he sat on a low promontory overlooking the northwestern trail a quarter of a mile away, he could see a couple of miles in the direction of Deadwood and to the west, a distance of four or five miles.

It was a clear, chilly morning, with considerable dew upon the grass.

A first sergeant had a certain amount of leeway and if his absence was noted at Deadwood that morning, nothing would be thought amiss. Lieutenant Gregson, who knew Leach's history, might confide in the captain, but even so, searching parties for deserters would not be sent out, with the Indians on the loose. Better lose a man than a searching party.

The sun came grudgingly over the hills in the east and Leach allowed his little fire to go out. After awhile he got to his feet and mounting his horse, rode down to the trail. He jogged along for a couple of hours, as the sun rose in the sky, then seeing dust ahead, left the trail for the shelter of a coulee nearby.

From it he watched the approach of a stagecoach, pulled by two horses, with another trailing from a lead rope. A frown creased Leach's forehead. Stages usually had six horses, never less than four. Something had happened to the coach.

On an impulse he leaped into the saddle and rode down to the trail to intercept the coach. His uniform was sufficient password to pull up the stage.

"What happened?" he called to the driver, noting a dirty, stained bandage about the man's forehead.

"Sioux," replied the driver, expectorating tobacco juice. "We pulled into the stage station last night and they was there, waitin' for us. Only a small party, but they got both my passengers and the horses."

"What about the people at the station?"

"What do *you* think?"

Leach nodded. "You'll run into a wagon train with an Army escort a few miles down the road. Tell them what happened."

"I shore will." The driver cocked his head to one side. "Scoutin'?"

Leach shrugged and kneed his horse, so that it pranced away from the stagecoach. He waved to the man and started up the trail.

They would have word of his whereabouts now in Deadwood. A sergeant, alone on the westward trail. Well, it couldn't be helped.

He followed the trail until the stagecoach in his rear was out of sight, then turned off and took to the rough country. Toward noon he shot a rabbit and cooked it over a small fire. He ate all of it, then took to the saddle again. An hour later he saw a thin thread of

smoke to the left, and riding in that direction, found the remains of the stage station, which the Indians had apparently fired after their ambush of the stagecoach. He also found several mutilated bodies.

Leach made a wide circle about the burned stage station and picked up the trail of a number of unshod horses. It led to the west and he followed it until the trail was split into two. He made out that there were a half dozen or so horses in each group, too few to attack any but very small groups. He gave up the trail, then, and cut back to the wagon road to the south.

WHERE the road crossed a shallow stream Leach found the dead embers of many campfires and guessed that this was the usual campsite of emigrant trains, one day out of Deadwood. Sam Quade's little train would probably stop here for the night.

Leach searched the vicinity and found a coulee a mile to a mile and a half from the stream crossing. He hobbled his horse and to make doubly certain that it would not stray, staked it out on a picket line. Then lying down on the grass, he watched the road below.

A half hour before sunset a rider appeared up the road. The point of the cavalry escort. Yes, a quarter mile to the rear came another rider and behind him the head of the wagon train.

Leach watched the wagons as they approached the stream. The lead one came to a halt, then the others formed a small, tight circle. The horses were staked out on picket lines, close to the wagons. Campfires went up and Leach tightened his belt a notch. The rabbit had been a small one and he had eaten nothing else all day.

Night fell over the hills and Leach could see the lights of the campfires below. He knew that Sergeant Potts would have sentries out, but his force was a small one and the sentries would have to remain pretty close to the camp.

Two hours after sundown Leach got his horse and, mounting, made a great circle about the camp at a distance of at least a mile. As far as he could tell there were no hostiles in the vicinity. He staked the horse again in the coulee then, and rolled himself up in his blanket.

At dawn he was up and in the saddle. Circling the camp, where breakfast fires had been started, he rode ahead of the wagon road, a half dozen miles, then tying his horse to a small tree, he sat down on the ground a few yards from the road.

An hour went by and a rider appeared on the road. He was a mile distant. Leach got to his feet and went to his horse. He mounted and started down the road to meet the rider. Before he had gone halfway, the report of a rifle rolled to Leach. The point had signalled the train.

Leach put his horse into a trot. Ahead, the trooper turned his horse sideways, ready for a swift retreat if it was necessary, but suddenly the rider again turned his horse toward Leach and actually came forward.

Then Leach recognized the man. It was Corporal Fiore.

"Leach!" the little man cried when still some distance away. "What the devil are you doing out here?"

Leach began pulling up his horse. "Fiore," he said. "It's good to see you."

"Huh!" exclaimed Fiore, trying to control his prancing horse. "You saw me only night before last."

"Then you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"That I've deserted?"

The little corporal's jaw became slack. "What'd you say?"

"I've deserted."

"You're crazy!"

Leach shook his head. "I left Deadwood yesterday morning, before you did."

FIORE stared at Leach, then turned his horse as another mount came pounding up; it was ridden by another trooper.

"Sergeant!" exclaimed the second trooper. "Didn't expect to see you out here."

The head of the wagon train appeared around a low knoll, a quarter of a mile away. Leach said to the troopers: "I want to have a talk with Potts."

He kneed his horse and the animal sprang ahead. It broke into a swift gallop that quickly ate up the distance to the wagon train. As he approached, Leach knew that he was recognized for Potts came forward to meet him.

"So you're the sergeant the stage driver told us about yesterday," Potts cried.

"I am, Cecil." Leach drew a deep breath. "You don't know that I've deserted?"

Potts hesitated. "I know you weren't at the barracks yesterday morning when we pulled out. Lieutenant Gregson and Captain Holterman seemed pretty excited about something and I heard them mention your name. Then yesterday, when that stage driver described a soldier with a top sergeant's chevrons, well, I got to wondering . . ."

Leached, looking past Potts, saw a man riding forward from the wagon train. He said quickly to Potts: "Ride ahead with me."

"Sure," said Sergeant Potts, spurring his horse.

The two men distanced the rider from the wagon train, then pulled up their horses. Potts said, then: "This part of your old trouble?"

Leach countered: "Quade's running this wagon train, isn't he?"

"That's right, but I don't see . . ."

"He's going to meet O'Hara, somewhere in Montana."

Potts blinked. "You mean O'Hara's behind all this?"

"He's one of the two men I've been looking for, all these years," Leach said grimly. "And I think Sam Quade's the other."

Potts whistled softly. "O'Hara, I'm willing to believe. But Quade, man, he's got a daughter . . . and she's here with him."

"The fool!" Leach said, bitterly. "Taking a woman on a trip like this."

"Hell, we got six women with us. And three-four kids."

"You saw what happened at that stage station yesterday?"

"Of course." Potts shrugged. "I'm a soldier; you are yourself, Leach. We take orders . . ."

"Not I—not any more. I'm through with the Army."

Potts' forehead creased. "I haven't any official word, but . . . you're admitting you're a deserter?"

"To you, yes." Then Leach grimaced and looked ahead. "And I told Joe Fiore."

"Damn," said Potts. "You put me in an awful spot . . ."

BEHIND them came the galloping of horse's hoofs. Leach, shooting a glance over his shoulder, saw that the man from the wagon train was making a determined effort to catch up with them. He relaxed his grip on the reins, then suddenly tightened them.

"That's Dick Selby, the Marshal!"

"Yeah," said Potts. "He's with the wagon train."

"He's going to Montana with you? Then I'm *right* . . .! I guessed it in Deadwood and this is the confirmation."

Selby pounded up. "Leach!" he exclaimed. "I thought I recognized you. What kind of a damn trick do you call this? Send your soldiers out with one man in command, then chase after and take over from him."

"So you're following Quade to Montana," Leach said coldly. "I called the turn; you've thrown in with O'Hara." His lips curled contemptuously. "What's he paying you?"

"Not a damn cent, Leach. I'm going to Montana for my own reasons. This wagon train just happened to be leaving and I thought I'd go along."

"Stick to that story," Leach said through bared teeth. "Stick to it to the end."

Selby wheeled his horse and went back to the wagon train Potts watched him soberly. "That man's a notorious gunfighter, Leach. Did you know?"

"He could be Wild Bill Hickok, for all I care."

Potts inhaled deeply. "What about you?"

"I'd like to travel with you, Cecil." Then, as Potts hesitated: "You can't deliver me back to Deadwood because you can't spare the men. Besides, you weren't told officially that I was a deserter."

Potts squinted. "That's spitting in the soup, lad. I've done a lot of soldiering in my time. In two or three different armies. Ignorance is no excuse; I've found that out." Then suddenly he grunted. "But what the hell could they do—break me? I've had stripes a dozen times. Sure, lad, ride along with us. You've got sense enough to escape from me clumsy hands when the time is right." He looked morosely off to the undulating hills. "Although, I'm thinkin' a lot's going to happen before any of us sees an Army fort again."

"You're right, Cecil. All of our scalps way be decorating the lodges of the Sioux."

Potts swore bitterly. "And these blasted emigrants have got to go looking for trouble! What difference does it make to them whether they're in Alder Gulch or Deadwood? There's gold in both places; you still have to dig for it, no matter where you are."

TOWARD sundown, when the wagon train was looking for a suitable camping ground, a man came along the trail, from the direction of Deadwood. He came at a good clip and his horse looked to be in pretty bad shape. He stopped and dismounted to give the animal a breather.

"Custer's back," he announced to the soldiers. "He's been reinstated and he's going to lead the regiment from Bismark in a day or two . . ."

A cheer went up among the soldiers. "The Sioux better get back to their reservations," one man declared.

The man, who wore a buckskin suit of clothes, spat on the ground. "They won't get off that easy," he said. "Long-hair'll teach Sitting Bull and Rain-in-the-Face the same kind of lesson he taught Black Kettle down on the Washita. They'll fight because he'll *make* them fight . . . I'm taking dispatches to General Sully." Crouched on the ground, he looked up at Leach. "A first sergeant's been posted at Deadwood as a deserter," he said casually.

"So I've heard," Leach heplied grimly.

"Leah? He wasn't spotted until last night."

"I'm the deserter."

The dispatch bearer chuckled. "Thought you might be."

"Anything you figure to do about

it?"

"Me? I'm carrying dispatches. That's enough of a job for one man."

"You'll be riding back this way?"

The man shook his head. "I'm riskin' my hair once. By the law of averages I might get away with it, but I ain't going to crowd my luck. When I get to the General I keep goin'—in the other direction." He got to his feet. "Well, I guess I'll make a few more miles."

He ran to his horse and vaulted into the saddle. In a moment he was off, waving to the soldiers and the wagon train.

The news that Custer was back with the Seventh and would be in the field in a few days, cheered the members of the wagon train as well as the soldiers.

Custer would be moving straight west from Bismark, into the heart of the Sioux Country. His approach would be the rallying signal for the Indians. They would head north from Wyoming and travel at top speed. The wagon train would stand a good chance of getting through, for it was skirting the southern part of the Indian country.

Night fell swiftly in the foothills and those of the soldiers not assigned to guard duty rolled themselves into their blankets.

Potts consulted Leach about the posting of guards. "You went through this last fall, Leach. What do you think—are the sentries out far enough?"

"No," replied Leach, "but you haven't got the men to put them out further. However, I've never heard of Indians attacking at night. They may try to stampede the horses, but I doubt if they'll make an all-out fight in the dark."

"Then why don't we put the horses inside the wagon circle?"

"Too many animals for the small arount of grass, Cecil. You've got to travel fast and far every day and the horses can't do it without plenty of forage."

A man came up from the wagon train. It was Sam Quade. He had already learned from Selby of Leach's presence and scowled at him.

"You in command of these soldiers, Leach?"

"No, Sergeant Potts is."

QUADE grunted. "The people in the train heard you were here and knowing that you pulled through the train last fall, they want you to take command . . ."

"Can't," Leach replied laconically. "I'm going along, but Sergeant Potts is in command."

"Why, if you're a top sergeant and he's just a plain sergeant?"

"It's a long story, Quade. I'm not going into it. Maybe if you think about it, you'll guess the answer yourself."

"It's because of me, eh? All right, we'll settle our differences when we're through this . . ."

Leach sprang to his feet. "You're admitting you're Billy Bligh?"

"Don't be a fool; I'm not admitting anything, except that my name is Sam Quade. But we've got a bunch of people in this train and we're in Indian country. We want to get through—safely, so . . ." He cleared his throat. "So I'm offering the services of our men for sentry duty and such."

"We could use them," Potts declared promptly.

Quade nodded. "Leach had trouble getting the emigrants to help the last time, but I'm not fool enough for that. You tell me how many men you want and where you want them . . ."

Potts shot a look at Leach. "The horses," the latter said. "Leaves your men free to make the rounds."

Potts accepted the services of a half dozen emigrants and posted them over the horses of both the wagon train and the cavalrymen.

The night passed without incident. and the next day the wagon train reeled off another twenty miles over easy, rolling terrain. This was the third day out from Deadwood and the train was well into the northeast corner of Wyoming, heading for the Montana line, another three or four days distant. There the train would take a more westerly course, traveling most of the great expanse of Montana Territory, two weeks of good traveling.

Of Indians the wagon train saw nothing, but there were smoke signals in the sky the following day and the train crossed the trail of a large band, heading north. Leach rode away from the emigrant train, following the trail for a couple of miles he came to a creek, where the unshod hoofs of the horses were plain in the sandy banks. He guessed then that there were easily a hundred horses in the war party. He rode swiftly back to the train and found it halted.

"What's up?" Leach asked of a group of emigrants who were looking off to the west.

"One of the soldiers made a signal," was the reply. "The sergeant rode up to see what's up."

Leach saw Potts come galloping back and rode out to meet him.

"There's an Indian village over that ridge," Potts said, when he reached Leach. "Forty or fifty lodges, but only a half dozen horses around it."

"Must be the women and children then," Leach said. "I guess that's where the war party came from."

"What do we do? Go around?"

LEACH studied the terrain ahead. The ridge was a low one, rising to the south and eventually becoming a mountain. It fell away to the right, but in that direction the war party had gone.

"If you try to skirt that mountain you lose at least a day; maybe more. And I don't think you want to circle to the north. I don't see that it makes much difference. If the village is just over the ridge, they know about you by now anyway. There are always some old men and boys left in the villages."

"You think we should go straight through?"

"It's a tough decision to make, but how do you know? There might be a bigger village in the mountains to the south—with warriors in it. I'm convinced that this territory is swarming with Indians."

"Dammit, I wish I was back in Fort Lincoln," exclaimed Potts. "Or at least Deadwood."

They rode back to the emigrant train and Potts explained the situation to Quade and the other men of the group.

"I say, go straight ahead and burn the damn village," Selby, the ex-marshal, declared. "That's what Custer did on the Washita. Wipe out every damn man, woman and child."

". . . You do that and you're inviting the massacre of this train!" Leach said quickly.

"They'd massacre us anyway if they were strong enough," Selby retorted.

His plan, however, found no favor with the emigrants and after a little discussion it was decided to go straight through the valley, without molesting the village.

The wagons started off and the troopers rode alongside of it, on the southerly side, strung out in a thin line; twelve soldiers, counting Leach and not counting the two men who rode in advance.

Slowly the train crested the low ridge and started down into the broad valley beyond. The Indian village was sprawled along the north bank of a small stream. Smoke issued from some of the lodges, but no Indians could be seen.

The wagons rolled down the incline, keeping close together. They would pass the village at a distance of about a hundred yards. Leach and Potts, riding at the head, watched the tents closely. There was movement in them, but whoever was inside feared to come out into the open.

The wagon train came abreast of the lents; in length it was just about as long as the forty or fifty lodges. Leach and Potts passed the last tent, then Leach turned his horse.

A hundred feet back, an Indian boy of twelve or thirteen suddenly darted out of a tent. There was a bow in his hands and an arrow strung in it.

He let fly with the arrow, at one of the wagons. The shaft fell far short, sticking upright into the ground.

A horse broke out from the emigrant line; it headed straight for the Indian boy, who was fitting a second arrow to his bow. Leach cried out hoarsely and drove spurs into his horse's flanks.

BUT he was too late. A revolver in the hand of the other horseman barked and the Indian lad was hurled violently to the ground.

An Indian squaw darted out of the nearest tent, screaming. She threw herself upon the boy. The killer of the young Indian pulled his horse back to its haunches, let fly a second shot, this time at the squaw. She was hit, but apparently not seriously, for she

The Indian boy was fitting an arrow to his bow as the horseman raised a gunhand and prepared to fire at him.

bounced to her feet, yelling at the top of her lungs.

She started running down the line of tents. The man on horseback, Dick Selby, sent another bullet after her, missing.

Leach, by this time, was bearing down on Selby. His eyes blazing in fury, he whipped out his Colt and galloping alongside of Selby, struck out with the barrel of the weapon. It caught the ex-marshal at the base of his skull and dropped him out of the saddle.

Selby hit the ground heavily, half scrambled to his knees, then collapsed, groaning. Leach whirled his horse, rode back and looked down at the moaning man.

"Damn you, Selby," he cried, "I warned you." He raised his gun again, but at that moment a couple of emigrants dashed up on their horses. And Sergeant Potts came between Leach and Selby.

"Don't, lad!" he cried. "It was a foul thing he did, but you've done enough."

"He murdered that boy in cold blood," Leach raged. "He couldn't have hurt anyone with that small bow. And Selby shot the squaw because she came out to throw herself upon her murdered child. The man's kill-crazy and better off dead . . ."

A gun banged. Leach, whirling, shot a quick glance down the line of tents. An aged Indian was standing in front of the last tent, an ancient musket in his hands.

"Let's get out of here before somebody gets hurt," Sergeant Potts cried. these people, but they'll bring the "We don't want to hurt any more of

whole tribe down on us."

A couple of emigrants were already helping Selby to his feet. The man couldn't walk by himself, but they started propelling him toward the wagons.

Indian women, as well as boys and a few old men, were now pouring out of the tents. A few arrows were shot at the emigrants and a couple of guns went off, but nobody was hurt.

Leach signalled to Potts. "Get them moving—fast!"

Somewhere behind the tents, a puff of smoke shot up into the sky, then another and still another.

"Signals!" groaned Potts. He roared to the emigrants. "Get moving—on the double!"

He and Leach pelted back to the head of the column. The wagons started rolling and then every Indian from the village swarmed out. Women screamed imprecations at the emigrants and soldiers, threw stones and sticks. A shower of arrows went out at the rear wagons, some of them sticking in the canvas, a few prodding the horses, but doing no especial damage.

IN a dead run the wagons tore off. Leach, looking over his shoulder, the smoke signals going up into the sky and shook his head.

"Better start looking for a place to make a stand," he shouted to Sergeant Potts.

The wagons were going downhill and making good speed, but the horses could not keep up the breakneck pace for long and inside of a mile the train was strung out along the valley, with ragged intervals between the wagons.

Leach galloped back along the line and told the drivers to slacked their pace and keep closed up, but it was useless. The emigrants were frightened and each driver was determined to go his own best speed.

A half dozen Indian boys, who had somehow found scrawny ponies, were harrying the rear of the train. One or two had guns and were banging away. Leach ordered a couple of soldiers to ride back and drive them off.

The men charged the young Indians and dispersed them, but when the rejoined the train, the Indians were back again, at the rear.

Then it happened. A wagon, near the head of the column, hit a prairie dog hole, bounced into the air and coming down, snapped an axle. The driver of the wagon jumped to the ground and tried to stop another wagon, but the second wagon swerved around him and continued at breakneck speed. There was a woman and two children in the back of the disabled wagon.

Leach drew his revolver and galloped his horse to the head of the train. Wheeling, he fired a couple of shots into the air and forced his mount into the path of the first wagon. He had to swerve his horse aside, but the wagon pulled up.

"Keep out of my way, soldier!" the driver cried.

"This is as far as you go," Leach yelled back. "The train travels together, or it doesn't move . . ."

"Oh, yeah?" retorted the driver. He caught up a rifle that lay on the seat beside him. And then he dropped it again as Leach sent a bullet into the canvas cover of the wagon, inches from the driver's head.

Sergeant Potts pounded up.

"Spread your men out here, Potts. Don't let a wagon pass," Leach ordered.

Without questioning Leach's decision, Potts signalled to his men and quickly deployed them so that each wagon had to stop as it came up.

"There's a wagon with a broken axle," Leach announced, then to the emigrants, "When it's ready to move again, the train moves. Not before."

"You want us to get massacred?" cried an emigrant.

"Do you expert to outrun Indians on ponies with these wagons?" Leach snapped. "What's the difference whether you fight here, or . . .?" He started to say, "five miles from here," but found it was unnecessary. The two soldiers from the point were galloping back, both firing their rifles.

"Make your circle!" Leach roared. "Your fight's come to you."

ONE moment the prairie had seemed deserted, then suddenly it was filled with Indians, coming from the west and north, in a broad semi-circle.

"Never mind the circle!" Leach cried. "You haven't got time. Down . . . fight for your lives."

The soldiers were already springing for their saddles. The bleating of the women in the emigrant train, the hoarse cries of the men and the screeching of the approaching Indians, drowned out Leach's commands and the soldiers dropped wherever they leaped from their horses. The guns of the emigrants began banging away and the soldiers opened fire, before the Indians were really within good range.

There was no orderly fire, no discipline among the defenders. Not that it would have made any difference in the eventual result, for there were fully two hundred Indians in the attacking war party, as against not more than twenty-five rifles among the emigrants and soldiers.

Indians plummeted from saddles as individual marksmen picked them off. But it was as isolated drops of rain beating against a windowpane.

The Indians came on, a hundred yards, fifty. A woman in the emigrant party, screamed and suddenly springing to her feet, started running. A man leaped up to bring her back, was riddled with bullets. Men rose to their knees, their feet, as the wave of Indians bore down. Others died on the ground.

The Indian horde hit the emigrants and without even faltering swarmed through and over them. Horses trampled men, women and children. Tomahawks flashed and thudded into skulls and bodies. Lances pierced a man here and there.

The force of the attack carried the Indians beyond the emigrants, but then whirling, they came back. Leach, who had emptied his six-shooter into the Indians, now caught up a carbine. He pulled the trigger in the face of a savagely painted redskin, charging down on him. The gun failed to fire, either because the cartridge was defective or because the gun was empty.

He started to throw up the barrel of the gun to take the blow of a tomahawk in the Indian's hand and then—then lightning struck him from the rear. Leach went down and out.

EXCRUCIATING pain lanced from Leach's head down into his body. A tomahawk seemed to be smashing him intermittently upon the head and Leach put up his hands to ward off the blows. To no avail.

Leach forced open his eyes and with a rush, recovered full consciousness and found that he was lying in the bed of a wagon and the crashing blows were the result of his head bouncing on the floorboards, with every jolt of the wagon.

He sat up—and looked into the painted face of an Indian, crouched on his haunches just inside the tailgate of the wagon. A tomahawk was in his greasy fist and he raised it as Leach

sat up.

Leach groaned, swiveled his aching head and saw that an Indian was driving the horses that pulled the wagon. His eyes went back to the Indian in the rear of the wagon. The man got unsteadily to his feet, made a threatening gesture with the tomahawk and Leach fell back.

For a moment he expected that his head would be split by the tomahawk and steeled himself for the blow, but when it did not come he opened his eyes and saw that the Indian had resumed his crouch.

The wagon bounced and jolted over the prairie land. By straining his ears, Leach became aware that there were other wagons to the front and the rear and many, many horses alternately clop-clopping and galloping.

Cautiously he raised his torso once more and a threat failing to materialize, moved a few inches and rested his back and head against a couple of sacks of meal. In that position he could look out through the rear of the wagon and see a half dozen wagons jolting along behind the one in which he was riding. And he saw Indians riding in and out of the line of wagons. One or two were wearing unbuttoned troopers' blouses.

A half hour went by when suddenly there was much shouting on the part of the Indians. Most of them galloped past the wagon in which Leach was traveling and in another minute or two, dogs began to bark; many dogs.

Leach, turning, saw Indian lodges, as far as his eye could see.

Leach's wagon stopped and the Indian by the tailgate got to his feet. He uttered several explosive words and hopped nimbly out of the wagon. His gesture with the tomahawk told Leach that he was to follow.

The wahooing of Indians, rose to a crescendo as Leach climbed out of the wagon. Standing on the ground he looked around at a circle of hostile faces, mostly squaws, who were being held back by threats and gestures on the part of the warriors who had brought in the captured wagon trains.

A white man fell out of the wagon behind Leach, limped to his feet. It was Sam Quade, his clothing torn, his face smeared with dried blood. After him came Molly Quade and Leach involuntarily emitted a sigh of relief.

Corporal Joe Fiore was herded forward by a couple of Indians and behind him another trooper, a huge private named Fedderson. For a moment Leach thought that these were the only survisors from the wagon train, but then two more men appeared, Dick Selby and Sergeant Cecil Potts.

AN Indian with a single eagle's feather in his braided hair, stepped up to Leach and tapped him on the chest. "Come!" he said.

The Indian strode ahead of Leach. He carried a repeating Spencer carbine and with it gestured aside the squaws who crowded forward. They opened up a narrow lane and the Indian went through. Leach, following, was spat upon by the squaws and now and then struck a vicious blow with a club. He looked neither to the right or left, however, and followed the Indian to a large tent. There the warrior stopped and pointing to the door, said:

"In!"

Stooping, Leach entered the buffalo skin tent. A moment later, Quade and Molly came in; blood streamed from a fresh cut on Molly's face and she was crying softly.

Quade threw himself upon the ground, but Molly stood, her hands covering her face. Fiore entered the tent, swearing softly, but stopped when he saw the girl.

Potts came in on the heels of Fiore and then, last, came Dick Selby who was literally catapulted into the crowded tent by the feet of a couple of Indians.

Potts whirled upon Selby and gave him a kick on his own account. "You're the cause of this all, damn your killing soul!"

Selby rolled over and came up to his hands and knees. "Nobody never kicked me before," he said, his face pale and twitching. "I ever get a gun in my hands again, you'll get down on your belly and beg."

"You ever see a gun again, it'll be a miracle," Potts exclaimed. Then he saw Leach.

"So *you* made it, too."

Leach nodded. "Is this all?"

"I guess so; I haven't seen or heard of anyone else." He shook his head. "I wonder why they saved us."

"Hostages," offered Corporal Fiore. But the hope died quickly in his eyes. "No, that sounds silly . . ."

Potts' mouth was a thin, straight line. You ask me, they brought us in to have some sport." He swallowed hard. "I've heard of the Indians doing . . ." Then he caught Leach's eye and broke off.

For a moment there was an awkward silence in the tent, broken only by Molly Quade's sobbing. Sam Quade spoke then: "Never heard of Indians *capturing* wagons. Usually they burn everything."

"This is a big camp," Leach said, "and there's a lot of food in the wagons. I guess they needed it . . ."

"Indians don't go for flour and bacon, as a rule," said Quade. "They prefer buffalo meat."

"They haven't got time to hunt," snapped Dick Selby, getting to his feet. "They're getting ready for a big fight . . ."

"Custer!" cried Potts. "They know he's in the field." He exhaled heavily. "Did you get a look at all the lodges, Leach? How many would you say there were here?"

"Five hundred and it could be as many as a thousand."

"A thousand lodges! There aren't that many Indians in Dakota . . ."

"We're not in Dakota now; we're in Wyoming, or maybe Montana. It isn't the Sioux alone who're out. The Cheyennes are with them, maybe some Nez Perces. This is a big village, but it isn't the only one. An all-out fight is coming."."

"CUSTER'LL take care of 'em," Corporal Fiore declared confidently. "A thousand Indians — five thousand, it won't make no difference to the Seventh. Custer's never been licked."

"Custer can't fight five thousand Indians," Leach said soberly.

"He doesn't have to. Terry's coming from the west; Terry, Gibbon and Crook. With Custer hittin' em from the east there won't be a Sioux left to send back to the reservations."

Molly Quade suddenly uncovered a tear-stained face and looked at Leach. "We won't be alive to know the final result; that's true, isn't it?"

Steadily Leach returned her appealing look. "We're in a tight spot."

Her mouth twisted bitterly. "So it ends here, in a miserable Indian village. How do they kill you? Do they burn you at the stake, or do they cut off your fingers, then your arms and . . ."

"Stop it," Leach said savagely.

She looked at him scornfully. "You didn't count on this, did you? You thought you'd go on living and hating — and seeking vengeance. You didn't think you'd meet your end here

with me—with us? You're hard, John Leach, hard and cruel, but the Sioux are cruel, too. They'll do things to us that you never . . ."

Leach's hands shot out and gripping her arms, shook her violently. "Stop it, I said. This is no time to get hysterical. The least we can do is show these Indians we're not afraid of them. If we've got to die . . ."

". . . We'll die smiling!" sneered Dick Selby.

Leach struck him in the face with his open palm, a stinging blow. He hit him a second time, rocking the gunfighter's head. "That's the last I'll take from you, Selby . . ."

Potts sprang forward, his hand clenched into a huge fist. "I'm with Leach, Selby. One more peep out of you and I'll knock you out."

Selby stepped back. The tent scraped his head and he ducked, as if somebody had struck him from behind. "You're so damn brave," he snarled. "You make me . . ." He broke off, as Potts stepped toward his threateningly.

An Indian with a full head-dress of feathers appeared suddenly in the open doorway of the tent. His eyes searched the group and came to rest upon Leach.

"You, Sergeant," he said. "Come!"

Leach drew a deep breath and took a step toward the door. Then Molly Quade sprang forward. "John—wait!"

Leach stopped. "This isn't the time, Molly," he said quietly.

The Indian gestured violently. "Come!"

Leach stopped. "This isn't the time, Outside the tent the Indian strode to a huge bonfire that had been built in an open space between the two rows of skin tents. The way was lined with squaws and Indian youths, who threw sticks at Leach and yelled imprecations at him.

NEAR the fire were gathered a dozen Indians, all wearing feather headdresses. The man who had brought Leach to the group folded his arms and fixed Leach with a cold glare.

"Where Longhair?" he suddenly barked.

"I haven't seen General Custer in months," Leach replied.

"You Seventh Cavalry. Longhair, your general . . ."

"Yes, but I've been at Deadwood."

"Longhair come," the Indian persisted. "How many soldiers he bring?"

Leach shook his head. Like a rattlesnake striking, the Indian's arms unfolded and the back of his hand struck Leach in the mouth.

"You talk!"

"I told you," Leach said, as blood trickled from his lips down his chin, "I come from Deadwood—not Fort Lincoln. I don't know a thing about Custer, or his plans. I'm only a sergeant, not an officer."

The Indian's obsidian eyes glittered. He suddenly pointed at one of the other Indians and said something in the Siouan tongue. The Indian bobbed his head and whirling, trotted to a tent. The first Indian refolded his arms.

The Indian came out of the tent, carrying a buckskin shirt and a large manila envelope. He trotted back to the group and handed the articles to the Indian who was questioning Leach. The latter threw the buckskin shirt at Leach's feet.

"You know that?"

There was blood on the shirt, indication enough as to what had happened to the former wearer. But a buckskin shirt meant nothing to Leach. He shook his head.

"Him, what you call—messenger. Carry order from Longhair to Gen-

eral." He suddenly thrust the manila envelope at Leach. "I read him. Say Longhair come from Dakota, meet Terry, Crook. Kill Sioux and Cheyenne."

Leach guessed then that these were the orders the courier had been carrying along the Deadwood trail, the man who had been going to Terry.

"Where Longhair?" the Indian demanded.

"I don't know."

The Indian pointed again at the man who had brought the buckskin shirt and captured orders. He spat out a couple of words and the man trotted off. This time he went into another tent. He was inside for a moment or two, then popped out and stood by the doorway.

A man came out; a man wearing a ragged Prince Albert, blood-stained shirt and torn broadcloth trousers. Dennis O'Hara, late sergeant of Troop M, of the Seventh Cavalry.

Leach stiffened. As yet O'Hara had not recognized him. He came slowly forward, his step quickening as he came nearer, even becoming a swagger.

Then he saw Leach and his step faltered. But only for a moment. He came up to the group, his lips bared in a cruel grin.

"Well, well, pardner!" he said sardonically.

THE Indian spokesman looked at Leach and pointed at O'Hara. "Him come from west. Say general marching with five thousand soldier."

"He's a liar," Leach said, "a liar and a deserter."

"What you mean, deserter?" demanded the Indian. "Him no soldier."

"He was a sergeant in the Seventh Cavalry," Leach retorted. "He ran away—deserted. He'd tell you anything."

"Nice going, Leach," snapped O'Hara. "Maybe I can fix things for you, too." He addressed the Indian. "Him General Custer man. He know where Custer."

The Sioux's eyes glittered as they shot from Leach to O'Hara, then back to Leach.

"Last time ask. Where Custer?"

Leach made no reply. The Indian stooped suddenly, tore a tomahawk from a seated Indian's hand and leaped at Leach. The latter tried to block the blow with his arm, but the dull side of the tomahawk smashed through his guard and struck him on the side of the head. Leach went down, gasping in horrible pain. He retained consciousness, but for a moment or two was oblivious to what was going on around him. Then strong hands grabbed him under the armpits, raised him to his feet and hurled him forward. Leach fell on his face, tried to climb to his feet and a foot kicked him down again.

"Get up, Leach!" snarled a voice in his ear and hands again raised him to his feet.

Leach summoned the last of his strength and stumbled away. A hand shoved him along. Blows struck him, but Leach scarcely felt them.

And then suddenly his eyes focused for one second upon the open doorway of a tent and he fell forward. Hands dragged him into the tent.

SOMEBODY dabbed at his bleeding head, but it was moments before Leach realized that he was back in the tent with the other prisoners. When his eyes finally cleared he looked up into the face of Molly Quade.

"John," Molly said softly, "are you all right?"

It was an inane question to ask, but the emotion behind the words oddly stilled the shrieking pain in his head.

He smiled wanly.

Then the voice of Dennis O'Hara brought Leach up to a sitting position. O'Hara was in the tent, crouched on the far side, talking earnestly to Sam Quade.

". . . They're having a big pow-wow tonight," O'Hara was saying. "I've learned a few words of their lingo and I made out that some high mucky-mucks in the tribes are expected. Sitting Bull, maybe. Or Rain-in-the-Face."

Leach said: "What did you tell them about the Army, O'Hara?"

O'Hara turned, looked impassively at Leach. "So you're awake again? You just had a very narrow escape."

"I said, what did you tell them, O'Hara?"

"Not a damn thing. They know Terry's coming down from the Yellowstone. They kept asking me how many men he had and I told them plenty, five thousand."

"How many has he got?"

"How should I know? Enough to wipe out this crowd, I guess."

"You didn't come from Terry's column?"

"Of course not. I wintered at Deer Lodge. I was going . . ." he shrugged. "I was headed east."

"To meet Quade?"

O'Hara's lips parted in a wolfish grin. "Still harping on that!"

Leach's eyes found Selby, glowering, a few feet from O'Hara and Quade. "Look at them, Selby. Do you recognize them now—Billy Bligh and Sam Morrison?"

Selby made no reply, but his eyes remained on Leach.

Leach said: "You were going to make your fortune from them, Selby. You were going with Quade to meet O'Hara. But Quade got word to O'Hara. So he was coming to meet you . . . when you weren't expecting him. A little ambush . . ."

"That isn't so!" cried Sam Quade.

"But it is, Selby," Leach persisted. "You know it is. You were going to be dry-gulched. Double-crossed . . ."

Molly Quade reached out and caught Leach's hand. "John, it's my turn to tell you to stop it. It's too late for all that."

"I've got to know," Leach said stubbornly.

O'Hara sprang to his feet. "Damn you, Leach, then know it! I'm Morrison, the man you've hounded for nine years. And he's—" stabbing his forefinger at Quade. "And he's Billy Bligh. Now, you know it and what good will it do you? You'll be dead before morning and so will all of us."

"You killed Helen Alderton," Leach said, tonelessly. "You crippled her and she lived for seven months . . . and died a little each day. I—hope you don't die fast."

"I didn't even know who Helen Alderton was," snarled O'Hara. "I had nothing against her. She got in the way of a bullet, that's all. It was an accident. But you—damn you, Leach, what kind of a man are you? . . . following us all these years! I'm not afraid of any man alive, but damn this ghost stuff, chasing us, year after year . . ."

"Woodley said that to me," Leach said, "as he was dying . . ."

"You killed him."

"As I would have killed you, O'Hara . . . or Morrison."

OUTSIDE the tent a wild hullaballoo arose among the Indians. War whoops resounded through the camp, women shrilled and guns were fired. Moccasined feet pounded past the tent. For several moments the din was so great that it was useless even to attempt conversation inside the tent.

of the prisoners. Then the noise subsided somewhat and O'Hara scurried to the door of the tent.

"A war party's come in, but a pretty small one. Wait . . ." He cocked his head to one side, strained to listen. "They b r o u g h t news. Longhair's near . . ."

"Near here?" Leach cried.

O'Hara shook his head. "No, thirty miles to the north. He's got the entire Seventh with him—the whole Army, they say . . ."

"A thousand men!" exclaimed Sam Quade.

"Not nearly," Leach said, shaking his head. "One or two hundred must have stayed behind at Fort Lincoln. And he must have another hundred or two with his baggage train and reserves. I doubt if he could muster more than seven hundred men for a fight . . ."

"There are at least three thousand Sioux right here," O'Hara declared. "And there's a camp up at the Little Big Horn with no less than four thousand lodges . . ."

"How do you know?"

"I almost ran into it two days ago. Then I cut down this way and . . . well, they got me, anyway . . ."

"Four thousand lodges," Sergeant Potts said in a tone of awe. "Ten or twelve thousand warriors . . . and three thousand here . . . If they get the General between them . . ."

"They won't," O'Hara said confidently. "He's too smart for that . . ."

"Maybe," said Potts, "and maybe not. I'm sure he hasn't the slightest idea of how many Indians are out. The talk in Deadwood was a couple or three thousand Indians—scattered war parties of a few hundred each. They'd have called you crazy if you'd told them that ten or fifteen thousand Indians would be on the war path—in two large parties . . ."

"Custer's foolhardy," Leach offered. "At Gettysburg he charged Stuart's entire army with a single brigade. We got cut to pieces . . ."

"We?" exclaimed Potts.

O'Hara grinned wickedly. "Sure, he was there. He was with the Boy General all through the damn war. Captain John Leach of the Thirty-Second Missouri. The hero of Chancellorsville, Yellow Tavern, Custer's favorite! Why do you think he was promoted over me at Fort Lincoln?"

Leach ignored the jibe. He addressed Potts: "Custer ought to know what he's going against . . ."

Potts groaned. "There's no chance."

"We've got to try."

"There's no hope of escaping, Leach," protested Sergeant Potts. "And even is somebody *could* get away, it's thirty miles to Custer—if he stayed still. Which he won't. He'll be moving . . ."

"West." Leach looked steadily at O'Hara. "Where's the village on the Little Big Horn?"

O'HARA licked his lips with his tongue. "You're asking something of *me,* Leach?"

"You're a white man, O'Hara. And you served in the Seventh Cavalry . . . how long was it? Six years? Seven . . .?"

O'Hara sank down to his haunches, staring at Leach. He said slowly: "Not that it'll do any good, but the Little Big Horn's twenty-five, thirty miles from here. North, northwest . . ."

With his finger, Leach drew a line on the earthen floor of the tent. "We're here," he said, pointing to the bottom of the line, "and the other Indian village is up here . . ." touching the top of the line. He drew a straight line from the top of the parallel one to a point several inches to the right. "Cus-

ter's about here . . ."

"The thing to do is to cut straight down the middle," interposed Potts, "if you travel through the night you can meet Custer before he gets to this little big horn . . ."

O'Hara jeered. "And all you got to do is get away from here. Try it!"

At that point, the Indians outside again created a clamor, drowning out the voices inside the tent. O'Hara, watching the proceedings, suddenly scuttled back into the tent. A moment later the Indian who had struck Leach with the tomahawk filled the doorway.

His eyes sought Leach, found him lying on his back. "You lie," he spat. "Longhair come. Tomorrow every soldier die." He stabbed out with his forefinger. "You die tonight. And you . . ." pointing at O'Hara. He finished with a sweeping gesture that included everyone in the tent. "All die tonight. Longhair tomorrow."

He turned and disappeared.

In the tent anxious glances were exchanged. Then little Joe Fiore sprang to his feet. "I'd just as soon die making a break for it . . ." He started for the door of the tent, but Cecil Potts caught his arm.

"Don't be a fool, Joe! You wouldn't get fifty feet. It'll be dark in a little while. We'll try it then . . ."

"I don't like the idea of sitting here waiting for it," Fiore protested.

"You think any of us like it, Joe?" Potts cried. "I've been wanting to go home for ten years. I kept putting it off. I—I haven't been in England in nineteen years." He added bitterly. "You think I want to be buried here on your American prairie?"

O'Hara opened his hand and exposed a little double-barreled derringer. "When they searched me, they didn't find this. I've been saving it . . ."

Leach scrambled to his knees, reached for the weapon, but O'Hara, laughing harshly, tossed it to the ground in the center of the tent.

"You can draw lots for it!"

DICK SELBY lunged forward. "This is my line . . ." he began and then Leach struck him savagely in the face. "You'll be the last to get it." He kicked the gun in the direction of Cecil Potts, who scooped it up.

"Two shots," he said. "One for . . ."

"No," said Molly Quade. "I'll take my chances with the rest of you."

"It's a pretty thin chance . . ."

"They keep the horse herd, out back of here," O'Hara said. "There's a bunch of twelve and fourteen-year-old kids watching them . . ."

"Are they armed?" Leach asked quickly.

O'Hara shrugged. "What difference does it make? It's a matter of causing a diversion . . ." He stopped, his eyes narrowing.

Leach leaned forward. "How far is the herd?"

"Couple hundred yards. Far enough . . . I was thinking . . ."

". . . Yes . . .?"

O'Hara laughed harshly. "They'll be holding a big pow-wow, out there in the middle. I was thinking . . ." He held his hand out to Potts. "Give me back that gun!"

Potts closed his hand over the little derringer. "What for?"

"The diversion, you stupid Englishman!"

Leach watched the big deserter narrowly. "How?"

"During the pow-wow. A can could walk right up and with two shots . . ."

"Sure," exclaimed Sergeant Potts. "You might put one bullet right through old Sitting Bull's head. That'd be a diversion, all right. But what'd happen to you?"

"What do you think?"

"The idea's all right," said Potts slowly. "Only . . ." he swallowed hard. ". . . We'll draw for it."

"Not me," declared Dick Selby promptly. "I'll take my chances with the rest, but damned if I'll commit suicide."

Joe Fiore sneered at the gunfighter. "And you're the big bad two-gun man!" He turned. "I'll draw."

"You, Sam Quade?" O'Hara asked, mockingly.

"Count me in," Quade replied dully.

O'Hara snorted. "I just wanted to see if you had it. You're out, Quade; you're too old . . ."

The Indian with the head-dress appeared once more silently in the doorway. His beady eyes flickered from one to the other of the prisoners, then settled on Dick Selby. "You, come!"

Selby's mouth fell open. "Wh-hat what for?"

"You, come!" thundered the Indian.

Selby scrambled to his feet, cowering in terror. "No," he whispered, then his voice rising. "No, no!"

Corporal Fiore rose behind the frightened gunman and gave him a violent shove that sent him through the door of the tent. Outside, a couple of Indians grabbed Selby.

THOSE inside the tent crowded to the open doorway and watched as Selby was dragged in the direction of the huge fire around which some hundreds of Indians had gathered.

"They're going to burn him!" Sam Quade cried hoarsely.

Molly Quade exclaimed poignantly and shrank back from the doorway.

Selby was swallowed up in the throng and for a moment the prisoners did not know what his fate was. Then, there was a great commotion among the Indians and they began to fan out, down the street between the two rows of tents.

O'Hara was the first to guess what was coming. "The gauntlet," he gasped. "They're going to make him run it."

"What's a gauntlet?" Potts asked uneasily.

"You'll see in a minute. Look—they're forming a double line. They start Selby at one end . . . he runs down the line . . ."

"What for?"

"For the fun of it," snapped O'Hara. "The Indians' fun. What do you think they've got all those clubs and tomahawks for?"

Potts recoiled in horror.

"Depends how fast he is," O'Hara went on. "He may not get ten feet. If he can run he'll miss a lot of them . . . He might get fifty feet . . ."

Outside the Indians were lining up. Aside from shuffling of many feet and a grunt here and there along the line, the Indians had become strangely silent. Of Selby there was no sign. He was down at the far end of the line. Whether he knew his fate or not, those in the tent did not know.

"It's getting dark," Potts said suddenly. "Ten, fifteen minutes more . . ."

"They won't stop with Selby," O'Hara said evenly.

"No," Leach said heavily. "They picked him first because, well, I guess there's someone here from that village where we had the fight this morning . . ."

A scream of awful terror split the early evening air. Selby had learned his fate! A roar went up and down the line of Indians. At the far end there was a commotion, yells and whoops . . . and then silence.

"He didn't get far," Leach said soberly.

"Here they come again," Sam Quade cried. "Wh-who'll it be?"

O'Hara whirled on Potts. "Give me that gun."

"What for?" Potts demanded.

"Your diversion, damn you. This is your chance . . .!"

The three Indians who had borne off Selby were marching steadily toward the tent. Inside, O'Hara smashed Potts in the face with his fist and tore the little derringer from his hand. He stuffed it into a pocket and then whirling, leaped out into the open, just as the Indians came up.

"I'm next," O'Hara snarled at the savages.

The Indian who spoke English looked steadily at O'Hara, then shot a glance at the door of the tent. Then he raised his shoulders and let them fall.

"Come!" he said to O'Hara.

O'Hara walked off between the Indians.

"Damn him," swore Leach. "He's cheated me."

"John," sobbed Molly Quade, "is that all you can think of . . . *now* . . .?"

"She's right, Leach," Cecil Potts said coldly. "O'Hara's a brave man . . . and we've no time to lose. Joe . . . Quade . . .!"

"Ready, Sergeant," chirped Joe Fiore. He got down on his hands and knees and scuttled to the rear wall of the skin tent. He raised it a few inches. "It's gettin' pretty dark, but I can make out the horse herd. Only . . ."

"What is it, man?" cried Potts.

"Indians," Fiore said softly. "A slew of 'em . . ."

"O'Hara promised a diversion. But whether it comes or not, we've got to go . . ." Potts turned. "Miss Quade . . ."

MOLLY started for the rear of the tent, stopped and looked at John Leach.

In that instant something snapped inside of Leach. Erased in one blinding flash was all the bitterness that had been in him for so long.

He said: "Molly . . .!"

A sob tore from Molly's throat. "John," she cried. "John . . .!"

He stepped toward her, took her in his arms . . . and then a spiteful crack came from the center of the Indian village.

"O'Hara's signal!" roared Potts. His mouth said something else, but the words were drowned by the sudden, hideous clamor that went up among the Indians.

Joe Fiore tore up the rear flap of the tent, held it up a foot or more. "Come on!"

"Hurry!" Potts added.

Leach thrust Molly ahead, helped her scuttle under the flap. He followed and outside the tent caught hold of Molly's hand. Behind him came Sam Quade, then Potts and Joe Fiore.

By the time the little corporal got through the others were already running swiftly toward the horse herd, a good two hundred yards away.

And off to the right, a hundred yards, Indians were running at breakneck speed toward the hub of the village.

Leach never let go of Molly's hand during that swift rush for the horses. Cecil Potts, unhampered, swept past him, but Molly and Leach kept ahead of Quade and Joe Fiore.

So it was Potts who met the first Indian by the herd. He was a boy of only thirteen or fourteen, but he had a carbine in his hands. He materialized out of the herd, saw Potts and the others coming at him and stopped in his tracks, frightened half out of his wits.

Only for an instant. He threw up the carbine, then, Potts was less than twenty feet from the boy, when the

carbine went off. He broke in his stride, but his momentum carried him onto the boy. His arms flailed out and he carried the youth to the ground with him.

Leach hurdled over Potts and the Indian boy, let go of Molly Quade and caught the rope bridle dangling from the neck of a tough Indian pony. He jerked the horse forward, reached out for Molly, and with a single heave raised her onto the horse's back.

"Ride, Molly!" he shouted. "Ride . . .!"

He lunged for a second horse, missed it as it reared up and whirling, headed for a third animal. He caught hold of a bridle and was jerked off his feet by the animal. He scrambled up, clinging to the bridle and pulling down the horse's head savagely, vaulted onto its back.

He slapped the horse's withers and using his knees, forced it forward away from the herd. He caught a quick glimpse of Sam Quade, mounting a pinto, then spied Fiore running toward an Indian, who was kneeling and aiming at Fiore.

The gun cracked and Fiore howled at the top of his lungs: "Missed me, you damn heathen!" He dove for the Indian youth and went down on top of him, smashing away with his fists.

That was the last Leach ever saw of him. He was riding now, following Molly Quade fifty feet ahead. She was skirting the pony herd, riding swiftly and surely. Behind Leach came Sam Quade.

And that was all. Potts and Fiore would not be riding.

Or Sam Morrison, alias Dennis O'Hara.

THERE may have been pursuit; Leach didn't know. But the darkness fell so swiftly after they fled the Indian camp that the prairie was like the bottom of a well before they had gone more than a mile. The three fugitives closed in by sound and slackening their speed, rode abreast. There was no conversation at all for almost an hour."

Then Leach spoke: "Let's stop a minute!"

Molly moved up beside him on her horse, as Leach dismounted.

"What are you doing, John?"

"I'm going to listen," Leach replied. He handed her the reins of his mount and dropping to the ground, pressed his ear to the grass.

He listened for a long moment, then got to his feet. "All right."

Sam Quade spoke out of the darkness. "We're heading north."

"Yes," Leach replied. "Thirty miles north."

They rode on through the darkness, sparing their horses and twice skirting Indian villages at a safe distance. At the first Leach counted more than a hundred fires.

An hour before dawn, Leach called a halt. "We've traveled thirty miles, at least. There's no point in going on and this is as good a time as any to rest the horses."

He helped Molly from the saddle. "Sleep if you can," he instructed.

She shivered under his touch. "I'm tired, but I don't think I can sleep."

"Lie down, anyway."

"And you?"

"We don't dare turn loose the horses and we've no picket ropes . . ."

"I'll hold them," Sam Quade offered.

Leach hesitated, then surrendered the reins of his own horse and that of Molly. "I'll take over in an hour."

He dropped to the sod beside Molly Quade. For a moment he sat still, listening to her breathing. Then a hand touched his arm, slipped down to his hand. Leach's fingers closed over it.

"It'll be all right," he said.

"I know." She was silent for a moment. "Maybe I can sleep now."

She stretched herself out beside him, her hand still in his. Leach sat beside her thinking . . . thinking . . .

He awakened with a start. Without realizing it he had dozed off, with his face on his knees. It was broad daylight, the sun already an hour above the horizon.

Beside him, Molly Quade slept peacefully on the short buffalo grass. The horses . . .

Leach sprang to his feet. There were only two horses, a hundred feet away. And Sam Quade was nowhere in sight.

Leach started running for the horses. As he neared them, relief flooded through him; both horses were hobbled with short lengths of rope. They could graze, but could not run. There had evidently been a rope on Quade's horse.

Unhobbling the horses Leach led them back to where Molly was still sleeping. He looked down at her for a moment before speaking. Then he called: "Molly!"

Her eyes opened, were blank for a moment, then brightened. She sat up. "John!" Her eyes went past him. "Where's—Father?"

"I fell asleep," Leach said. "Just woke up a minute ago. These horses were hobbled . . ."

"He's gone!"

He nodded.

"Where?"

"I don't know . . . I—I'm sorry."

"He was . . . afraid of you . . ." She could not keep bitterness from her tone.

He made no reply. Last night . . . last night was gone.

HE HELD out his hand to help her mount, but she ignored it and threw herself upon the back of the little pony. She took the reins from him without touching his hand and sat on the pony, waiting for him to lead the way.

He mounted stiffly, turned his horse to the east. "We'll have to try it blind for awhile. If the Indians were right, Custer is ten or fifteen miles east of here, maybe a little south." He frowned. "But O'Hara said thirty miles from the camp. Those Indians who brought in the news had to travel thirty miles. They probably sighted him around noon, a little before. He wouldn't stop before night." He shook his head. "In that case he'll be west . . ."

He turned his horse and kneed it. It started off at a swift lope and Leach had to hold it in to allow Molly to come up. They covered two or three miles without speaking, then Leach, worried, turned south. After a mile or so, he halted.

"I don't see any dust down this way," he said.

"I've been thinking," Molly said slowly. "Maybe we should split. You go one way and I—the other . . ."

"No," Leach said promptly. "We'll make a circle. We're bound to cut their trail, or see dust. Seven hundred horses will raise a pretty big cloud . . ."

Molly lapsed into silence and rode beside Leach as he turned eastward. They trotted along for two or three miles, then began gradually heading north.

Ten minutes in this direction and Leach axclaimed:

"Dust!" He pointed to the north.

He sent his horse into a swift lope and in another half mile the dust cloud ahead became more distinct . . . and wider.

"They're moving west," he announced. "We'll try to cut them off."

The dust cloud grew slowly, for it was a clear day and visibility was good.

An hour passed, two. The dust cloud was still moving westward, broken a couple of times as the column passed behind hills.

The sun was high in the skies, when Leach and Molly finally climbed a high knoll and looked down into a broad valley. Now at last they saw the source of the dust cloud. A long column of cavalry, five or six miles away.

"That's it!" Leach cried.

Molly exclaimed, "We've got to catch them. That village O'Hara told about . . ."

"I know," Leach said. "It can't be so many miles to the west." He did not call attention to the long cloud of dust that had materialized on the southern horizon.

They put their horses into a gallop, down the long incline into the broad valley. The mounts were none too fresh but they ran well enough for two or three miles. Then Molly's began to fall behind.

Leach pulled up. "Three minutes' rest," he called. She stopped her horse, smiled wanly at him.

"You think I haven't seen the dust to the south."

HE inhaled deeply. "I guess that's caused by the warriors from the camp we left last night."

"I know. There's . . . there's going to be a battle . . ."

". . . The worst these plains have ever seen!"

"We'll be in it?"

"I wish you could avoid it, but—well, I think your chances are just as good with the regiment, as alone on the prairie. Indians will be everywhere in a few hours."

"John," she said, "I've been thinking . . . it's . . . it's going to be all right. I—I understand about Father . . ."

Across the prairie came the rattle of gunfire. It was faint, but continuous.

"Come on!" Leach cried.

And now they drove their horses to the last bit of their tough endurance. The animals fairly flew across the buffalo grass. Ahead of them, the column had disappeared into a small patch of woods, but Leach had marked it and headed straight for it.

A mile. Both his and Molly's horse were laboring, but Leach, leading the way, was unsparing of his mount. He dug his knees into its sturdy ribs, raked the flanks with his heels.

They tore into the trees, burst through and saw dismounted cavalrymen ahead. A crackling of rifle fire came from the head of the troop, but there was more firing, distant firing off to the right and ahead.

Leach's mount stumbled, but made a quick recovery and plunged on. A soldier saw them, rode toward them.

It was a man from Troop M of the Seventh. "Sergeant Leach!" he cried in astonishment.

"Where's the captain?"

The man pointed and Leach raked his horse's flanks. But it was no use; the animal was utterly spent. Leach sprang to the ground, shot a quick look back and saw Molly dismounting, then ran forward.

Lieutenant Gregson materialized out of a troop of soldiers.

"Leach, by all that's holy . . .!"

Panting, Leach pulled up and saluted smartly. "Reporting for duty, sir. There are four thousand Indian lodges at the Little Big Horn and—"

"It's true, then!" cried Lieutenant Gregson.

"You know?"

"Sam Quade caught up with us an hour ago. The former sutler at Fort Lincoln . . ."

"He's here?"

Gregson shook his head. "Major

Reno's in command here. The general split the column a couple of hours ago. He—he went north . . . toward the Little Big Horn . . ."

"He'll be ambushed there!"

"He already has been. I—I only hope the sutler got to him in time."

"Quade went after General Custer?"

Gregson nodded. "Here—here's Captain Holterman and . . . Major Reno . . ."

Leach snapped to attention and saluted the two officers. Captain Holterman regarded Leach sternly. "Where have you come from, Sergeant?"

Lieutenant Gregson saluted the captain. "He's just verified Sam Quade's story, Captain Holterman—about the lodges at the Little Big Horn . . ."

Major Reno groaned. "Then it's all up with Custer."

"We'll have to join him," Holterman said promptly.

MAJOR RENO shook his head. "We have got enough on our hands here. There are more Indians ahead of us here than I realized . . ."

"And three thousand coming up from the south, sir," Leach said.

He turned on his heel, started running. "Bugler!" he called. "Sound the retreat."

Captain Holterman started to follow the major, then turned and pointed at Leach. "Sergeant, you'll have to take Lieutenant Brown's place. He . . . he fell a few minutes ago."

Leach saluted. "Yes, sir."

Lieutenant Gregson came up behind Leach and clapped him on the shoulder. "On the double—Lieutenant!"

Molly Quade ran up, caught Leach's arm. "I'm with you, John . . . to the end!"

The fate of Custer is known to every school child; that of Major Reno's command not so well. Often he has been called the scapegoat, yet an Army court cleared him. His battalion was sadly routed and defeated on that terrible day, but he kept it together and fought a long, bitter engagement with the Indians. On the point of being overwhelmed he retreated his forces across a creek and dug in for the night.

The fight was resumed the next day and Reno retreated again. The Indians, fearful of Terry's column coming from the north and west, gradually relinquished the fight and Major Reno was left in possession of the field. His casualties were fearful and added to those of Custer's direct command, where every man was killed, left only a handful of survivors of that proud regiment, the Seventh U.S. Cavalry.

Captain Holterman, unfortunately, was not one of those who finally rode back into Fort Lincoln. Lieutenant Gregson again assumed the command of Troop M but his duties were many and he never seemed to get around to preferring charges of desertion against his first sergeant. And then one day, it was too late.

First Sergeant Leach had done two things: he had successfully passed the examination that made him a second lieutenant in the United States Army . . . and he had gotten married.

Captain Gregson was his best man at the wedding.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH:—

"SHEEPHERDERS WAR"

By EMILE EARLE

A Great Action Novel of Crucial Days in the Old West!

FIASCO IN DIAMONDS

TWO ordinary-looking prospectors dropped in at a San Francisco bank one day, in 1872, to make a deposit. Their deposit was not money, nor the gold which was being gathered up from the earth in abundance throughout the West in those days. It was a bag of uncut diamonds and rubies, which they estimated as being worth $125,000.

Arnold and Slack were the names of these two weather-beaten miners. They seemed to be quite simple-minded fellows. They casually told bank officials that they had discovered these gems out in the desert. They were very careful, however, not to give out any information concerning the exact location where they had found the treasure.

The president of the bank and his associates became highly excited as they visioned great stores of precious stones in the soil of the West. They wired friends in London, the news spread, and it was not long before a great many persons knew of the discovery. South African diamonds were just coming into the markets, and people were interested in investing in these gems and in the companies which mined them.

Upon being urged to allow their claims to be examined, Arnold and Slack reluctantly consented to lead a small group to it, provided the men were blindfolded the last part of the way. The party brought back to San Francisco with them quite a number of diamonds, also amethysts, rubies, sapphires and emeralds.

It must have seemed a little strange to the experts that so many different kinds of precious stones had been found in a small area. These come from entirely different rock formations, and had never been found closely associated. However, this was the West, new and wonderful, and it appeared that anything could happen.

The gems were put on display in San Francisco, and people were tremendously interested. Few could accurately judge uncut diamonds, but a stone had been sent to Tiffany's, famous New York jewelers, who had declared the diamond to be worth $150,000. Excitement mounted, and most everyone was anxious to put money into the new venture.

Wealthy San Francisco businessmen wanted control of the discovery, and went about investigating it carefully. They employed a first class mining engineer to make a report on the property. Slack and Arnold took him and his party to the location by a zigzag route. The engineer went to work surveying the limits to be staked off. Before he had time to sample the contents of the property, one of the party complained of being sick and demanded to be taken back. The mining expert made his examination of the soil hurriedly, so that the party could return together. Apparently Arnold and Slack did most of the searching for diamonds, washing and panning the gravels to find the gems.

BACK in San Francisco, the mining engineer reported to the businessmen who had hired him that the diamond venture was a safe and attractive proposition, and he recommended that the purchase price of the claim be $4,000,000. A company was immediately established, capitalized at $10,000,000, and shared in by twenty-five men. No stock was offered for sale to the public, fortunately. The sum of $2,000,000 was raised at once, of which a large sum was paid to Slack and Arnold. Reports differ as to what these two men actually received, but it was probably around half a million dollars.

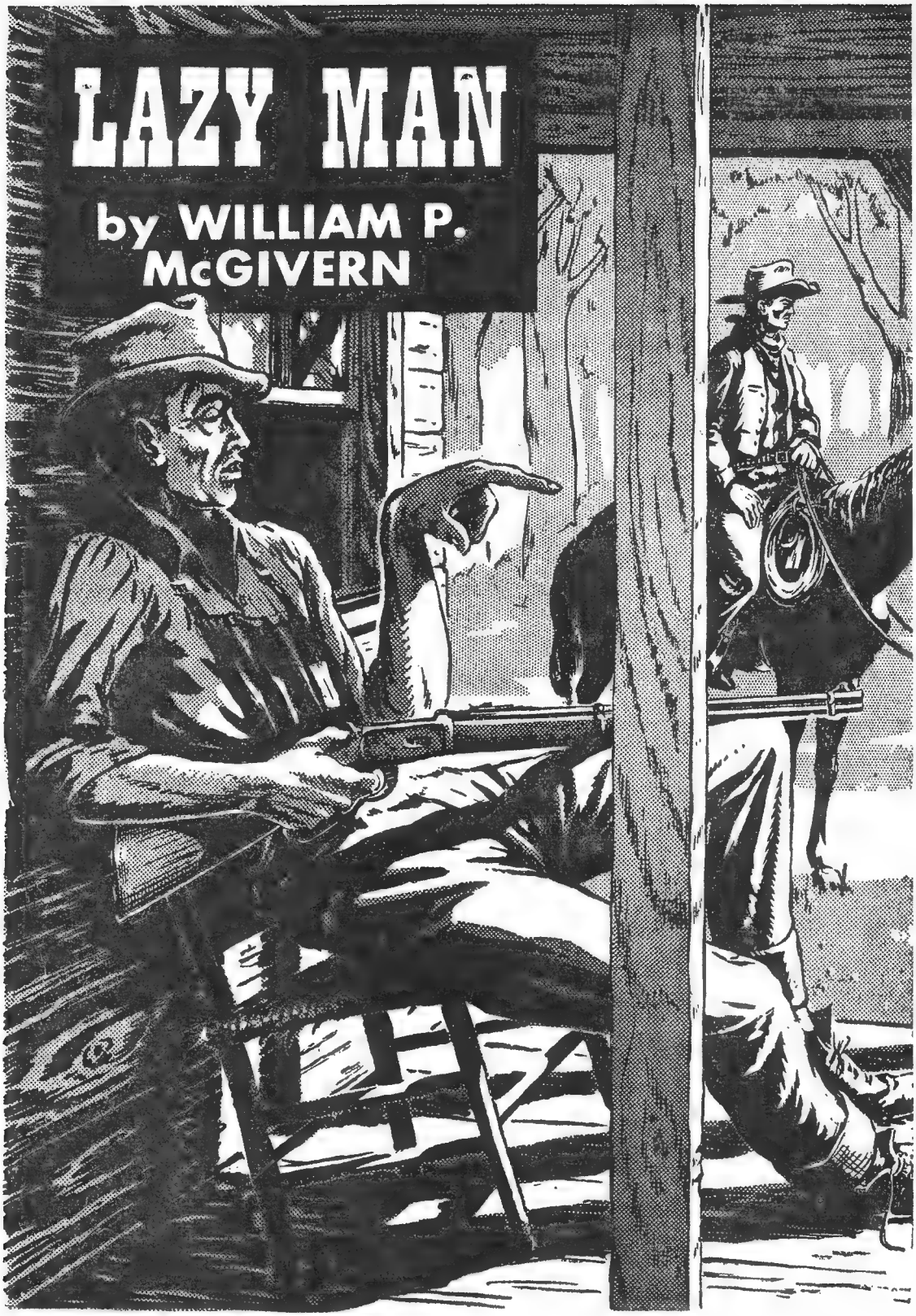
The news of the diamond mines had spread like wildfire to all the mining camps, as well as to the big investment centers. Some U. S. geologists were making a survey in the region, and visited the place. What they found exposed the whole thing as a fake!

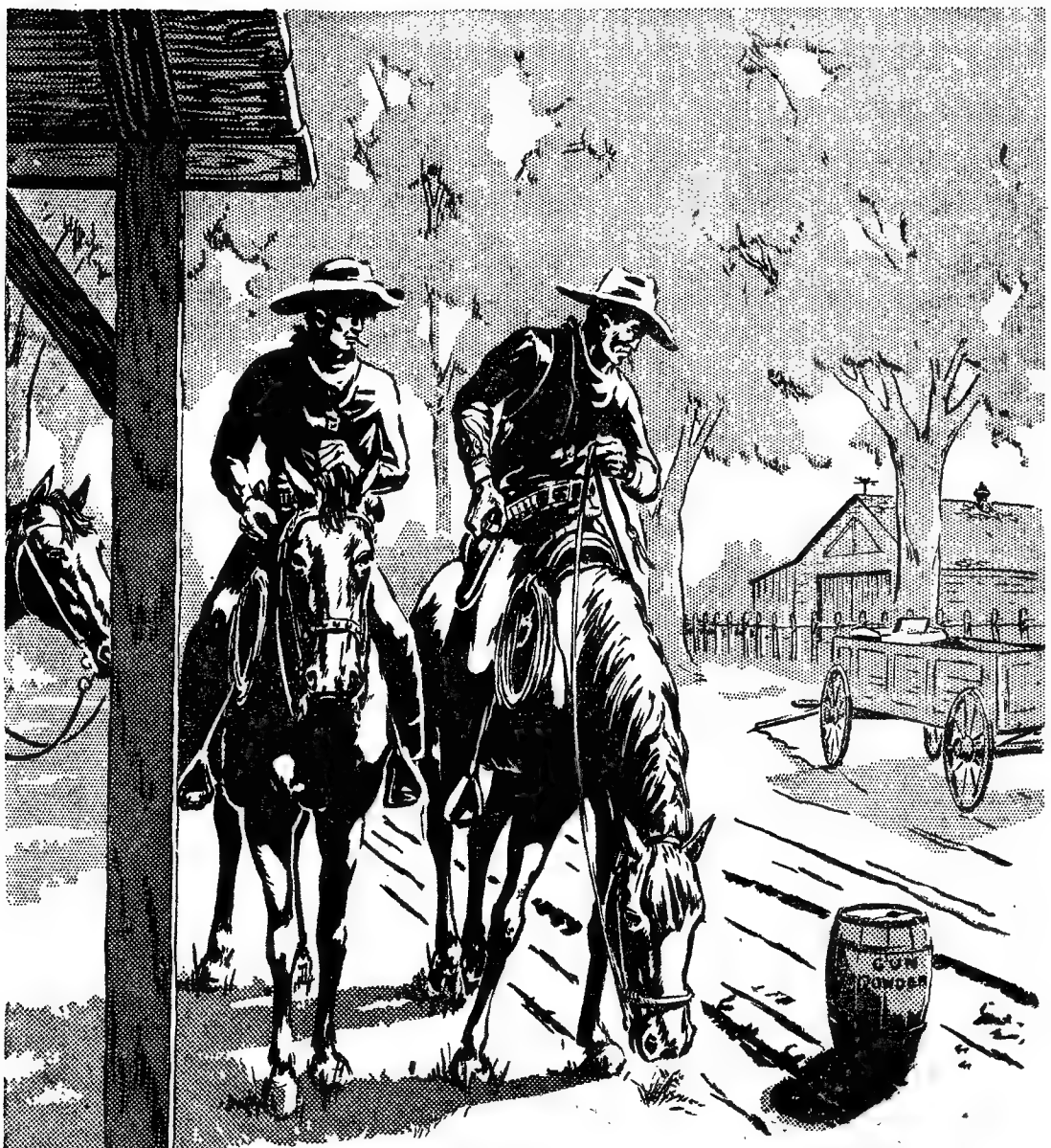
These geologists discovered some diamond fragments which had been artificially cut. Further investigation made them certain that most of the diamond material was waste matter from a diamond cutting company. Together with some larger uncut diamonds for show, it had been distributed through the top layer of soil. The other gems were sprinkled about on the surface. The underlying rocks were not the kind to contain precious stones.

The two "simple minded" characters, those "weather-beaten prospectors," were in reality two slick crooks. They had scattered a few thousand dollars worth of diamond material over the locality, had carefully excited interest in their claim, and then sold out for half a million dollars.

The president of the bank, who had been one of the chief enthusiasts in the venture, took most of the loss. Two million dollars was paid back to the twenty-five men of the company. Arnold had been the leader of the two crooks, and had taken the greater part of the money they received. He went to Kentucky, where he had friends, and settled down to live comfortably on the proceeds of the swindle.

He was sued there for perpetrating this fraud, but the townspeople supported him, and he got off with paying $150,000 and the understanding that no further charges were to be made against him. He had little chance to enjoy his ill-gotten gains, however, as he died less than a year after this settlement was made.


LAZY MAN
by WILLIAM P. McGIVERN



JUDD MASON was known as the laziest man in Eldorado, Texas. He was over six feet tall and so thin he could almost walk through the crack between the swinging doors at the Silver Dollar. Everybody said he was just too lazy to eat.

That wasn't too far wrong. Judd looked tired all the time, and if he wasn't yawning and stretching out somewhere for a nap, he was just waking up from one, looking tireder than ever.

Judd said he got tired when he was a boy working his father's farm, and that he figured he had to spend a lifetime getting himself rested. And from the way he acted that was just what he intended to do.

He had a few acres right along the cattle trail and it was good land, same as everybody else in the county had, but nobody had ever seen Judd put a hand to it. He sat out in front of his shack all day with his eyes closed and his feet resting on an old log that had grooves in it dug by his heels.

He made a little money from the trail gangs that came by twice a year. He didn't have any business, but he'd let 'em use his stove and sleep in his barn, and they'd pitch him a few silver dollars when they were leaving.

It was hard to tell his age. He might have been thirty, but he could have been forty. His face was long and sad, and his ears stuck out comical from his head. He was the color of an old boot from the sun and his hair was bleached white. But sometimes his eyes had a sparkle in them that made him look younger.

His wife was a pretty woman, and she worked just as hard as Judd loafed. They had a cow and every morning his wife, Eliza, carried a couple of buckets of milk into Eldorado and sold them to the printer and the Parson. She did mending and washing for the women in town, and was always busier than a hound dog with fleas. She was a cheerful woman, too, always pleasant and good-natured. If she minded having a lazy cuss like Judd for a husband nobody ever heard her complain. Sometimes it seemed like she was happier than the wives whose husbands spent all day working and most of the night worrying about how to make ends meet.

Judd never worried about anything, because he said there wasn't enough time to get rested up to be always worrying. The women in town thought he was a scandal. Mrs. Nelson, whose husband ran the general store, used to run him down all the time at the sewing get-together.

"Hmmph!" she'd sniff. "He's a fine one, he is. Setting watching his wife kill herself all day long, and then grinning at her and telling her she's got pretty eyes."

"She don't seem to be killing herself," someone might say.

"Well, no thanks to him, she isn't. Give me a good provider and a steady man any day."

She had a good provider all right, but old man Nelson also had him a little blonde dancer over in the next county. They must have both been happy.

ELDORADO was a little town in the neck of the Panhandle and the steady population was about six or eight-hundred people. It was on the trail route and twice a year the trail gangs hit town and generally left enough money to keep things going for four or five months. They pretty near bought out old man Nelson's store each trip, and the Silver Dollar did more business in two nights than it did the rest of the year. The people who didn't work in town were nesters whose farms spread around Eldorado. The land was good and lush and they made out all right. The merchants in town liked the trail gang's business, but the nesters were a little leary. They kept thinking of the time when the cattlemen would get the idea of grazing their herds for a week or so in the lush Eldorado valley before pushing on to market. They never had, but the farmers with fenced land were always worried about the time when they would.

Then one night about seven o'clock a farmer walked into the Silver Dollar.

There were a couple of men sitting around the stove for it was a chilly fall night, and old man Nelson was standing by the bar.

The farmer walked straight to the man at the stove, and they sat up straight when they saw his face. He was red and mad looking. "All right," he said, "it's happened. A herd stopped about eight miles from my place, and the foreman said they were moving into the valley in the morning. Plan to stay ten days."

The nester's name was Rikker, and he was known as a reliable man. The men sitting around the stove looked at each other anxiously. "They can't do that," one of them said.

"Are they goin' to push through our wire?" another asked.

Rikker nodded vigorously. "Said they weren't worrying about fences. Said they're going to push the nesters right out of the valley."

There was a general murmur of angry conversation and then old man Nelson came over and held up his hand.

"Now let's don't go jawing foolish-like," he said. "This is goin' to mean a big change for Eldorado, one way or the other. I think maybe we'd better get everybody in town together for a little talk. How about my place, the back of the store in an hour? Rikker, you and the others can go round up the men."

"You ain't got no land," Rikker said. "What are you worrying about?"

Old man Nelson was a little bald fellow with a short nose and a funny wart on his cheek; but he stood right up to Rikker like he was bigger than Old Joe.

"I got my family and business," he said. "That's the same as your land is to you. Now let's parley and decide what's best to do."

The meeting got started after a few drinks all around. There were about sixty men sitting around on the bales of woolens in the back of Nelson's warehouse. Everybody was mad and scared. Nelson stood up and held up his hand for silence.

He was just starting to speak when the back door opened and Judd Mason ambled in, looking sleepy and tired. His long face was sad and he was struggling with a yawn.

"Heard about the meeting," he said, settling down in a comfortable spot. "Thought I'd set in."

There was a general laugh at that, and it was good for everybody because the feeling was getting too high.

Somebody said, "We'll wake you in time to get back home, Judd," and everybody laughed.

Then Nelson started talking. He stood in the middle of the room with the candlelight shining on his bald head, his hands in his pockets.

"Now, men," he said, "looks to me like we got to decide the future of Eldorado right here. No use me telling what we're up against. The cattlemen want the nesters' land. We need the cattle business. So we're right in the middle. First off, we can't fight 'em. They got tough waddies that'll throw down on the first nester that makes a stand. They're rough, tough boys and we ain't fightin' men nohow. Anyway we need their business. This ain't much of a town if you take away the trade they give us on their regular trips. Now if they're going to pasture here it'll mean five times as much business all around. I ain't a landowner, but if I was I'd settle this peaceful-like with the cattlemen and make it better for everybody in El Dorado."

"Yeah, you ain't a nester and that's just the point," a big, rawboned farmer put in. "It's good for your business to have the cattlemen here, but us nesters ain't got no other way to make a living.

How about our families if we give in to 'em?"

"Now I'm comin' to that," old man Nelson said. "I don't mean to give 'em anything. I mean to sell. That's it. Sell 'em your land, and move across the mountain to Snow Valley. Land's just as good and you won't be in their way. Another thing, when things start booming here there'll be work for everybody right in town."

"We can't feed our families on your guesses," someone said. "I'm for telling 'em to go to hell. It's our land, ain't it?"

OLD man Nelson shrugged. "Land has a way of belonging to whoever is squatting on it. You're squatting there but can you stay there when they start pushing you?"

"If we stick together we can lick 'em," the man said.

"Well, are you goin' to stick together?"

There was a lot of discussion about that. Half the nesters wanted to fight; the others wanted to avoid trouble. The meeting finally broke up without coming to anything.

Old man Nelson was last to leave. He was starting to blow out the candles when he saw Judd sleeping on a pile of blankets off in a corner. He shook his shoulder until Judd blinked his eyes open.

"Right interesting meeting," Judd said, yawning.

Old man Nelson said, "You slept through it all, Judd. But you should have stayed awake. Them cattlemen will be after your land too."

"That little old place I got?" Judd grinned and got to his feet. "Not enough for them to bother about."

"Don't count on that. You're right on the trail march."

"So I be. And that's where I like it."

"Now, Judd, listen to me. Men like you, even though they think you're lazier than a bear in winter. Why don't you talk to the boys, tell them they ain't goin' to gain nothing by being stubborn. You tell 'em to sell out peaceful-like."

Judd scratched his head. "That's a lotta trouble goin' around talking to people. Gets in the way of rest. No, thank ye, Nelson. I'll ten' to my sleeping."

Judd went on home and slept like a baby until ten o'clock the next morning. His wife brought him a tin cup of coffee in bed and sat beside him while he drank it.

"You're looking mighty pert, this morning," he told her, when he finished. "And that's the best cup of coffee I had in a long time. Seems like you cook better every year."

"Judd, tell me about the meeting last night? Seems like all the talk in town is about the cattlemen moving into the valley. What's going to happen?"

"Can't hardly tell," Judd said, settling down in bed again. "If the nesters hold onto their land there is goin' to be a fight." He sighed wearily and closed his eyes. "Nothing harder in the world than fighting."

"But, Judd, we're nesters."

"Now, they ain't goin' to bother us," Judd said. "Honey, just pull the shade a mite as you leave, will you? Seems like I just can't get enough sleep this year."

His wife left him and Judd slept peacefully until the afternoon. Then he got up and washed his face and put on the clothes his wife had laid out for him. There was a pot of turnips and meat warming on the stove and a pan of flour biscuits in the oven. The coffee was set to boil. Judd ate his lunch and then took his seat before the shack, his heels hooked comfortably

into the old log, the sun playing on his face. He closed his eyes peacefully and rested.

About four, two nesters drove up in a buckboard. One was Rikker, the other was the big rawboned man, Jester. They got out and walked up to Judd.

"The trouble has started," Rikker said. "They done cut the wire on Jester's place and drove cattle on his land. Chased Jester out at the point of a gun. We're starting a little committee to protect our rights. We're going to round up the nesters and go to war. We want you with us, Judd."

Judd lifted his head off his chest and yawned. "Seems like a powerful lot of trouble," he said.

"We're going to fight for our land," Rikker said grimly. "How about you?"

"Set down, men. You make me tired looking at you standing in the sun. Now, nobody ain't after my land." He waved a hand wearily over his poor acres. "Who'd want this miserable place?"

"You're fooling yourself, Judd," Rikker said. "You'll be in their way and they'll push you out as quick as they push anybody else. Are you going to fight with us?"

JUDD squinted at him. "You make it sound like I ain't got no choice, Rikker. Well, I got a choice. I'm sitting right here. I like it here and I'm too tired to go chasing around fighting cattlemen, or worrying about 'em. All my life I looked for a place to sit. Now I found one I like fine, and I'd be a fool to move."

"You'll move when the X-Bar men ride up here," Rikker said. He jerked his head at Jester. "Let's go. Judd'll have that lazy streak of his changed pretty soon!"

"Bye," Judd said mildly.

He was sleeping before their buckboard had rattled away in the distance.

The nesters were unable to present a solid, defiant front to the cattlemen in the weeks that passed. Rikker's group of night riders accomplished little, since they were but a handful. Most of those were family men and after a few had been wounded and two killed, the committee fell apart. The other nesters reacted in individual fashions. A half dozen loaded their wagons and left their homes for Snow Valley across the mountain. Some attempted to barricade their houses, but this resistance was broken by night raids by the cattlemen's rough riders. Others sold out immediately.

During these upheavals which shattered the peace of Eldorado there was one man who was apparently unaffected. Judd continued to sleep happily, and spend his days as before, sitting comfortably before his shack. The eighteen farms in Eldorado valley had fallen to the cattlemen, and the nineteenth was Judd's, overlooked because of its insignificant size.

The townspeople speculated on what would happen when the X-Bar moved onto Judd's place. They tried to question his wife who was working as hard as ever, but she was as unconcerned as Judd.

There was one blow to Judd's serenity. Across the wide reaches of Eldorado valley now sounded the bellowing grunts of feeding cattle. Where once had been quiet stillness, there was now babel.

Judd was awakened once by the noise and he sighed regretfully. He tried to go back to sleep but for the first time in his life he found it impossible. Frowning, he went inside his dark cabin and lay on the bed, the blankets pulled tightly over his head. He slept after a while, but it was not the satisfying

dreamless sleep he had once enjoyed in the sun.

The next morning a nester driving by Judd's shack saw a very strange sight. Judd was rolling a barrel from behind his cabin, pushing it forward to a place near the road.

The nester grinned; "Little late to start working, Judd. The Bar-X boss will be here this afternoon. They ran Bull Smith off his place last night. You're next."

Judd straightened up, perspiring visibly. "This is more work than I've done in sixteen years," he said, panting.

"What's the idea of putting a barrel out in front of your cabin?"

Judd shrugged tiredly. "Just a little idea I got."

The nester scratched his head, then drove away. Judd went into his shack and came out in a moment with a rifle under his arm. He sat down in his usual place, the rifle across his knees, and closed his eyes. The sun was warm, but the noise of feeding cattle swelled over the valley in a very disturbing fashion.

Judd frowned.

ABOUT four that afternoon Judd was awakened by the sound of hoofs. Looking down the road he saw three horsemen coming toward his place at a canter. They turned off and reined up in front of his shack. The men on the outside were lean, hardened young waddies. They wore crossed gun belts and forty-fives slung down on their thighs. The man in the middle was wide-shouldered and stocky, with a dark stubble of beard on his broad face and small cold eyes. Judd knew him to be Frank Mace, foreman of the X-Bar's trail gangs.

"Light and sit," Judd said, hospitably.

"No time for that," Frank Mace said harshly. "You're goin' to be in our way about this time tomorrow. The cattle will be moving this way to graze. We figure that gives you plenty of time to clear out."

Judd blinked in confusion. "You mean you want me to leave here?"

"You know what's going on in the valley. The cattle are goin' to use this land you damn farmers have been spoiling." Frank Mace's face hardened. "You got twenty-four hours to git."

"Now lemme get this straight," Judd said, puckering his forehead with thought. "You want me to get out by tomorrow evening. Well, sir, do you reckon on how much work that's going to mean for me?"

"That's your affair."

"Yeah, I suppose it is, *if* I go," Judd said. "Now just look at it," he went on, conversationally. "Supposing I want to pull stakes. First I'd have to go and borrow me a team. Then I'd have to pack all my furniture and the stove and get it loaded. After that it's a two-day ride over to Snow Valley, where I'd have to go to find me another place." He shook his head dolefully. "That's a powerful lot of work to put a man to."

"You tellin' me you ain't goin'?" Frank Mace demanded.

"Doesn't seem any other way about it," Judd said. "No, sir, I don't like work well enough to go to that trouble. Seems like I'd be happier if I stayed right here."

"You won't be so comfortable here by tomorrow morning," Frank Mace said.

Judd looked surprised. "I expect to be comfortable," he said. He suddenly nodded in the direction of the barrel he had rolled out from his house. "See that?"

The three men looked at the barrel, then back at Judd.

"What about it?" Mace said.

"Well, that barrel is full of gunpowder," Judd said, in a dreamy voice. "And you might just notice that this rifle in my lap is pointing right at the barrel. When I pull my trigger up she goes. Anybody within a fifty yard area is goin' to be awful unhappy."

"You fool, you'd be blown sky-high yourself," Mace snapped.

"That's better'n bein' put to a whole lot of hard work," Judd said, thoughtfully. "I probably wouldn't even hear that powder go off. But if I got to move I'll know all about the work of it."

Mace shook his head. "You're screwier than I've heard tell," he said. He nodded to his men. "Let's go."

They wheeled and cantered off from the direction they came. But about two hundred yards down the road they stopped and turned about. They seemed to be talking, then they all dismounted and pulled the rifles from the scabbards on their saddles.

Judd watched them with interest.

They all got down on one knee and he could see they were steadying their sights on the barrel.

Judd sighed regretfully and got to his feet.

JUDD was lazy, but there was a lot of things he could do well. His father had been one of the early settlers, and he believed that staying alive depended on doing everything a little better than the next fellow. That's why he had driven Judd like a mule, teaching him to farm, to trap, to build and to hunt.

Judd had worked so hard learning all this that when his Paw died he settled down to rest up a little. But he had learned his lessons pretty well by that time.

Now he raised the smooth butt of his rifle and nestled it carefully into his thin shoulder. The three men down the road were taking their time, concentrating on the barrel.

Judd sighed once more and fired three shots.

Then he put the rifle against the side of his shack and sat down again in his comfortable chair.

Down the road there were three sprawled figures lying on the ground.

The news got to town when a boy on a mule passed the three dead men and then heeled his mule into Eldorado on the run. There was a crowd of men at the Silver Dollar and when they heard about it, they let out a big cheer. Then Rikker shouted: "Let's get 'em all, while they're not expecting anything."

There was enough men there to form a hard riding committee. They rode on the cattlemen's camp by nightfall.

After that night Eldorado went back to its peaceful, customary ways. The cattlemen avoided trouble after that and gave up their plan to pasture their herds in the valley on the way to market. The nesters went back to their farms.

A week later a delegation of the nesters called on Judd. They brought along jugs of corn and they wanted to celebrate. They wanted to make a hero out of Judd.

His wife came to the door and welcomed them heartily. "Come on in," she said. "Judd's taking a nap but he'll be right glad to see you. And one of you might be good enough to roll our rain barrel back where it belongs. Judd put it out there last week, but he's been too tired ever since to bring it back."

THE END

SIXGUN BALLOT

by H. B. Hickey

IF WE pull through this week, Ben Waterman thought, we'll be all right. But we won't pull through.

Using his elbows and his big hands, he shoved and pushed his way through the crowd in the Cattlemen's House and broke into the cleared space around the table. Walt Homer was

Men can take only so much.

He ran toward the porch where the girl was struggling madly in a wild attempt to get away.

A man can fight for a woman with his fists — but it's a different matter with an election where the votes are counted with bullets.

holding Jed Seeburg's arm straight while Linc Palmer tied on a pair of splints. There was a half empty bottle of whisky next to Jed and his furrowed face dripped sweat. His teeth were clamped tight over inturned lips.

"What the devil happened?" Ben asked.

They had been making enough noise until then, but Ben's words brought down a tense silence. Jed's long sigh ended the stillness and then Palmer tied a last knot and said, "Finished, Jed."

Seeburg's eyes came back from wherever they had been and he nodded. Walt Homer let the splinted arm drop gently. He looked up at Ben.

"What do you think happened?" Walt said. "Saxon broke Jed's arm, that's all. They had a fight and he broke Jed's arm."

"Cut it out, Walt," Ben said very sharply and Walt looked down at the floor. "How did it start?"

"I started it," Seeburg said. He took a long pull at the bottle and coughed. "In the sense that I threw the first punch, I started it."

He was not a young man and now he looked older still as he dug out a dirty bandana with his good hand and wiped his face.

"I was standing in front of Carmer's, talking to Dave Asquith, and Sam Warren's Julie came out of the store and started down the street. Bull Saxon and a couple of his cronies were right nearby. I heard what Saxon said when Julie passed him."

He coughed again and the movement of his body shook his arm. His eyes closed for a long second. Ben waited until they opened.

"I'm sorry, Ben. I know you're right; we haven't got a chance against Edmonds and his bunch if we don't keep our heads. But it's got to be just too much to stomach when a decent girl like Julie can't walk down the street without being insulted. I took a poke at Saxon and he threw me into Carmer's tie rail and broke my arm."

He broke into a string of throaty curses.

"Only thing I'm really sorry about," he said, "is that I was fool enough to use my hands instead of my gun."

"It's a good thing you didn't pull your gun," Ben told him. "That's all Frank Edmonds is waiting for. All he wants is an excuse to turn this into a shooting war."

"Devil with that noise!" Walt Homer blurted. "I'd rather be gunned down any day than keep my hands in my pockets while I get pushed around like a yellow dog!"

He was young, barely nineteen, and the recklessness burned hot in his eyes. What was it, Ben Waterman wondered, that made a kid like Walt value life so lightly? Maybe it was because life had never been anything to Walt except hard work and a pushing around by men like Edmonds.

Maybe. The rest of these men were older and they had fared no better in their years. A nester never did.

"Shut up, Walt," Ben said, seeing that the boy's words had stirred the rest to the point of action.

HIS eyes swept the men, and there was something about this tall, patient man that held them quiet. Still in his early thirties, Ben Waterman had already lost his own wildness, although once in a while there would be something that broke through his hard shell. When that happened he needed a tight rein on himself.

"Shut up, Walt," he said again. His hard gaze took in a man with a silver star, standing at the back of the crowd. "Where were you when the fight

started, Kensel?"

"Wasn't around, somehow."

Kensel pushed his way toward Ben and the men parted to let him through. The marshal was a tall man, taller by inches than Ben, but not as wide. He wore his guns low and he could get them fast when he had to. He moved at a slow pace generally, the pace of a man who is sure of himself.

Frank Edmonds had brought him in and had made him marshal, just as Frank Edmonds had brought in Bull Saxon and his boys. Frank Edmonds and the big stockmen, Ben thought. Kensel was no coward, but he knew which side his bread was buttered on.

"No, Waterman," he said. "I wasn't around, somehow."

"You never are."

"I wouldn't put it that way. Seeburg says Saxon started it. Saxon has it otherwise. One man's word against the other's. What do you want me to do?"

"What about witnesses? Dave Asquith?"

"What about the men who were with Saxon?"

Kensel grinned into Ben's face and the nester felt anger rush through him and beat at his temples. His big hands balled into fists and he took a quick step forward. Kensel backed off deliberately, his lean face sharply vigilant.

"Don't crowd me, Waterman."

"Damn you, Kensel," Ben raged. "One of these days I'm going to crowd you plenty. I'm going to tramp on your toes and see just how tough you are. You won't always be marshal."

Kensel's face was bleak, his glance stonily contemptuous as it swept the crowd of nesters and came back to settle on Ben. He watched Ben's gun, waiting for the beginning of a draw, and when it did not come he laughed.

"I won't?" he said. "Well, you can elect another any time you want. Just say the word and I'll deputize some men and we'll make it nice and legal."

Bending to tie Seeburg's splints, Linc Palmer had pulled his overalls out of his boot tops. He had remained stooped, trying to stuff them in again. Now he came erect with a rush and stalked around the table toward Kensel, his overall legs hanging sloppily out of his boots.

"We know what you'll do, Kensel," he gritted. "That tin star makes you a big man, don't it? You're big, all right. I could hit your back myself at five hundred yards."

This time Kensel's face went completely white with fury and he leaned forward, aiming his weight at Palmer. Ben stepped quickly between the two men and shoved Linc away and said:

"Cut out that kind of talk. And you better get out of here, Kensel. Get out fast."

Kensel shifted his gaze and saw the nesters bulling in close around him and his features were suddenly pinched with something like fright. These sag-shouldered, bone-weary men in faded overalls were desperate. Only Ben Waterman's voice, urgent and harsh, held them back.

"All right. Let it drop. Give him room to get through. Give him room, I said!"

It was a shout that had in it all the force of his thick body and it split them. Kensel went through them, his back ramrod straight, his feet toeing an invisible line.

AFTERWARD Ben felt weak. He didn't want any more close ones like that. He slumped into a chair and shook his head at Palmer.

"That was a crazy thing to say, Linc. You almost blew the whole thing up in our faces."

"I don't care." Palmer's voice was shaky, his bald head glistening with sweat, but his shakiness was the result of anger, not fear.

"I don't care," he said again. "How much can a man take? He had you going too, Ben."

"Hell, he had us all going," Dick Baim said. Dick was a bearded bachelor from Cedar Creek. "I think maybe Linc had a good idea about Kensel's back."

"If you think bushwhacking Kensel will get us an election, you're crazy," Ben said. "Besides, we're not like Saxon and his bunch. Not one of us has the guts to shoot a man in the back. Let's use our heads."

Baim refused to be talked down.

"Ain't nothing in the world will get us a fair election. So what the hell."

But if Ben's words had not affected Baim, they had at least touched the others. They were breaking up, a few already heading for the door. Ben shook his head, knowing that they had lost some of their confidence in him.

"Anyway, we've got one more week. I'll think of something."

He wasn't looking at them when he said it. He poured himself a drink from the bottle on the table and gulped it down, feeling thankful for the raw burn of the whisky. When he looked ly again Baim too was on his way out.

Only a handful of men were left and they were drifting to the bar. Ben knew how they felt, hollow men without hope, most of them too old to move elsewhere and start over.

Jed Seeburg had remained in his chair, staring at his broken arm as though hypnotized by it. Linc Palmer had his elbows on the table, his round bald head cradled in his hands. Only Walt Homer remained completely unbowed. He sat with his chair tipped back on its hind legs, his arms over the top rung. He laughed shortly, bitterly.

"One more week, Ben. By then there won't even be mud for the cattle in the creek bottoms. And Frank Edmonds will have every spring sewed up. You won't think of anything to stop him and you know it."

"We'll see."

"We'll see nothing. He's got them almost all fenced off already. When the creeks run dry in a few days we won't let our cattle die of thirst. We'll pull down some fences. So the shooting will start anyhow."

He grinned his wild grin and shrugged his shoulders in a way that said he didn't give a hoot. His voice broke into a silly singsong:

"Whatcha gonna do when the water runs out, Ben?

Whatcha gonna do when the creek runs dry, Ben?

"Whatcha gonna—"

"Stop it," Ben said.

But he couldn't help smiling. It was a wry sort of smile that touched the corners of his lips and drew them upward. If he could only take it the way Walt was taking it he might be able to figure a way out. He was too tense, too rigid.

"Let's go, Walt," Ben said. Walt let the chair come down with a bang and Ben turned to Linc Palmer. "Better ride along with a couple of men when you leave. Play it safe. Kensel was riled plenty."

OUT on the street the night heat was oppressive. Ben looked up at a sky full of stars. Not a cloud, he thought. Be two months before we can hope for a heavy rain.

"If we could only get Kensel out," he said. "If we could just get us an honest election."

Walt didn't even bother to answer.

He was staring across the street at the line of horses tied before the saloon. From inside the brightly lit place came the ringing laughter of men with nothing to fear.

"I could take me a shotgun," Walt muttered. "I could take me a shotgun and walk in there. And before they knew what hit them I'd have the odds whittled down."

Crazy talk, Ben thought. Good thing there was no one to hear Walt. Except for the saloon and the express office there wasn't a place open. In front of the express office the transfer stage waited, ready for its twice-weekly run. In summer it always left at night.

Ben watched the horses pawing earth as they settled between the shafts. The driver was almost ready, waiting while the agent scrawled a last minute letter. Ben Waterman's eyes widened. It was a thought which struck him.

"How much money you got with you, Walt?" he demanded.

"Couple of bucks; why?"

"Here." Ben dug out a few crumpled bills and some change, thrust them at Walt.

"Maybe we can get us that election after all! You'll be on that transfer when it pulls out. Switch over to the regular run at Vliet and take it into Prescott. There's an army post there."

Walt stared at him as though he were mad.

"Ask for troops, you mean? You're crazy, Ben! You know what they'll say. We got local law and they got no business butting in."

"I don't care what they say. Tell them the Indians have broken out. Tell them there's a war on. Tell them anything. And if their commanding officer won't listen—put your gun to his head and tell him if he won't give the order you'll blow his brains out. I don't care how you do it, but do it!"

He was shoving Walt along, giving stopped to talk they'd lose their chance. The driver was already in his him no opportunity to argue. If they seat, whip in hand. He turned at Ben's call and waited.

Then Walt was inside the stage and the door was swinging shut behind him. Ben stepped away and saw the long whip snake out and the driver said, "Hey! Hey now! and the horses threw their weight forward and there were spurts of dust from beneath the wheels.

Ben turned away and his lips said silently, "Luck, Walt." He was suddenly aware that he was not alone and he spun on his heel and found Frank Edmonds and his foreman, Beeler, watching him. Edmonds was fanning himself gently with his hat, his silvery hair shining in the clear moonlight.

"Thinking of taking that stage, Waterman?" he asked quietly. "Maybe you should have."

"Not tonight," Ben said, thankful because he knew now that Edmonds had not seen Walt get in. "Still room here for all of us."

"I don't think so. You and your nesters have even forced us out of the Cattlemen's House and into the saloon. And I hear that one of them picked a fight with Saxon today."

He laughed quietly at the thought of how it had turned out. When he spoke again it was as a man might speak to a child.

"Don't let them get out of hand, Waterman. Be bad for them if they do."

HE WAS a tight-knit, cool man with clear cool eyes that could be very cruel, and it was his pleasure to dress well and speak softly and use his power in a quiet way. Beeler was

grinning beside him.

"You're letting Saxon go too far," Ben warned. "He's getting out of hand. That kind always does. You've got a daughter of your own."

"Leave her out of this," Edmonds said icily.

"I haven't seen Ella since the trouble started, and you know it. I'm just warning you."

"And I'm warning you, Waterman. Kensel says you threatened him. Just remember, he's the law around here and I'm always ready to back up the law."

He pointed his finger mildly at Ben. Then he clapped his hat on his head abruptly and turned and swung onto a big black gelding. For a moment he was facing the saloon doors. A smile touched his lips as he turned back to look down at Ben.

"Here comes Saxon now. Talk it over with him."

AS always, it was not Bull Saxon's size which struck Ben, but rather his compulsively angry attitude, his appearance of readiness to go berserk at any moment. Like a delicately balanced Juggernaut, he needed only a light push to set rolling his destructiveness.

Built on the lines of a grizzly, Saxon had enormous hands that swung sideways across his body as he walked. No shirt could ever fit him; his immense chest was always exposed. His corded neck grew out of his shoulders like an oak tree. But his eyes were small and always darting suspiciously.

Edmonds doesn't realize what he's fooling with, Ben thought. Saxon is simple minded, a little crazy perhaps. Big as he is, he's always afraid that someone is picking on him.

"You want to talk to me, Mr. Edmonds?" Saxon's words were not clearly spoken but his voice was a rumble of thunder.

"No, Bull. I thought maybe Waterman did."

Saxon whirled and thrust himself close to Ben. He was ready to run amuck on the slightest provocation. Lucky he didn't kill Jed, Ben thought. But knowing Edmonds was watching him, Ben refused to give ground. Saxon could crush him perhaps, but he'd bear some scars when the fight was over.

"No?" Edmonds said in amusement. "I guess I was wrong, Bull. Waterman doesn't want to talk to you."

"Sure, Mr. Edmonds. Anything you say," Saxon rumbled in his childish diction.

His breath reeked of whisky. Spending most of his time in the saloon, he drank enormous quantities of the stuff but somehow was never drunk. Now he stood facing Ben, slightly slouched but steady on his feet.

"Good night, Waterman," Edmonds said. Ben did not look at him.

"Mr. Edmonds said good night," Saxon snarled. "Why don't you beat it?"

It was humiliating to take such an order but Ben made himself do it. Especially now, now that there was a chance, however slim, that Walt might bring some help.

Only five days more, Ben thought as he crossed over to the Cattlemen's House. Only five days more and there might be an end to swallowing his pride and his anger.

ONLY five days more, he was thinking again as he rode the next day into the rolling range above his cabin. If anyone can get those troops it'll be Walt. And in the meantime I've got one hothead less to handle.

He rode across a dry creek-bed and

headed toward the shack where Linc Palmer and his wife lived. Palmer was another one who had to be watched. His wife needed this climate to live; and Palmer would commit murder before he'd be pushed out.

Ben found them both at home, he had some watery coffee out of a cracked cup before he broached the subject on his mind.

"You used to be a printer before you came out here, weren't you? I thought I once saw some type lying loose around here."

"Most of it's gone," Linc said. "Or melted down. I've got a few sticks left, though."

"Enough to print some ballots? Just the form. The names can be filled in later, by hand."

"Ballots?" Linc was wildly excited. "You mean Edmonds is going to give us a square election?"

His elation vanished when Ben said, "Not that I know of. This is just on the long chance that something I'm working on pans out."

"Oh. Well, I suppose I could manage all right, but it would be quite a job."

"Don't talk like that, Linc," his wife said. She smiled at Ben. "Sure he'll do it. I don't know what's got into him lately."

So Linc hadn't told her how bad the situation was. Better not to. A constitution like hers couldn't stand much worry.

"It's the heat," Ben said. "Sure get a man down."

"It sure does," Linc agreed. "Three, four days be all right."

"Fine. You needn't mention it to anyone. Might save some disappointment."

"I'll bet it would," Linc said sourly. "But supposing—just supposing, mind you—we get an election; who do you figure will vote for our man?"

"You'd be surprised. Why do you think Edmonds is so dead set against it? Because he knows the townsmen would be solid behind us. They're sick and tired of rowdy punchers and men like Bull Saxon."

"Sounds mighty fine," Linc said. "But dreaming ain't getting my chores done."

He got up heavily and Ben said goodbye to Mrs. Palmer and followed Linc outside. Standing out in the yard, Linc shaded his face and peered skyward at a brazen sun.

"You'd better pray for rain, Ben. So far you've done wonders keeping us still. It can't last. I've already run my stock onto Jed Seeburg's land. And his water's almost gone."

"Don't forget the ballots," Ben said in a kindly tone.

Linc was all right. He'd do his best to stay out of trouble. He'd get those ballots printed, too. In a game like this, Ben thought, there was only one way to play. You had to act as though all the breaks were going to be in your favor. Otherwise you were lost from the start.

Chances were that the troops wouldn't come. Chances were that there'd be shooting before the week was out. Miracles didn't happen often.

Ben shrugged. He almost wished the week was up and there was an end to the waiting and strain. A stone, silver white in the sunshine, caught his eye and reminded him of Frank Edmonds' hair as it had looked in the moonlight.

Reining up sharply, Ben drew his gun from its holster and pointed it at the stone. Like a kid playing a game, he said, "Bang! You're dead, Edmonds."

LAUGHING at himself he sheathed the gun. A man could certainly

go crazy if he took things to heart. If there was fighting to be done he'd have his share in it. In the meantime the string had to be played out.

He rode past Seeburg's without stopping and went around the long way home to avoid meeting anyone else who might keep him. For a way he followed the line of the creek, its brackish water only inches deep, and then he left it and came up over his own line and beyond it over the ridge.

Riding so, he saw his own small herd first. They stood in the shade of a shoulder of rock, their heads down.

That's wrong, Ben thought suddenly. They ought to be around that curve. They ought to be at the spring. Beneath him his horse leaped forward as Ben applied his spurs. They shot past the startled cattle, took the curve at full speed.

Ben pulled up hard at sight of the wire that stretched around the spring. In front of the wire was Beeler, and with him a half-dozen punchers.

Beeler waited. He had a face like an executioner, so calm and careful.

"Going somewhere?" he said.

"I'm going to cut that wire," Ben told him.

"You mean you're going to try. Ten will get you fifty that you're dead before you touch it."

He had a sure thing and he knew it. Suddenly Beeler's face was less watchful and he was grinning. But he didn't let his hand leave the butt of his gun.

I thought I knew how it felt, Ben said to himself. This has happened to the others and I thought I knew how they must have felt. But I didn't. This is bitter.

"You've got no right," he said, the bitterness choking him.

"Possession is nine points," Beeler said. "That's what the nesters say, isn't it? Just so. If you want to talk about it, see Edmonds. Or maybe Kensel."

He's not so sure of his draw, Ben thought, noticing how Beeler's hand stayed glued to his gun. I've met better men. Before the rest could get me I'd have that grin wiped off. But he fought the urge down.

"You're a fool, Waterman," Beeler was saying. "You could be a big man if you'd get over on the right side. Nobody's good enough to buck the house. Get smart."

It was an offer, a barefaced offer.

Not Beeler's offer, Ben knew. Frank Edmonds'. This was worse than fencing the spring. Rage mounted in Ben and shook him until he could not control himself and he knew that Beeler's body with a bullet in it would be his answer to Edmonds.

Then suddenly there was the clatter of hoofs behind Ben, and Beeler looking past him in surprise. And a startled feminine voice.

"Beeler!" Ella Edmonds said. "Ben! What's going on here?"

Ben leaned forward and pounded his fist on the pommel of his saddle until he had brought himself under control. Only then did he trust himself to turn.

"Nothing, Ella. Beeler's just fenced off the spring, that's all."

He didn't have to tell her what that meant. Her eyes were wide and a little frightened and she looked at Beeler.

"Your father's orders," he said.

She was a lot like her father in her calm reactions. She was also tightly knit, like him. But there the resemblance ended. Her dark eyes were warm and there was warmth in the dark tone of her skin.

"Oh," she said softly, knowing she could not remand the order. "What are you going to do, Ben?"

The moment of violence had passed

and Ben was satisfied that it had. Getting himself killed wouldn't help anyone.

"Run my stock over to Seeburg's," he said. "They'll be all right there."

"I'll ride along with you a little way." She could be defiant too. She was staring down Beeler and his men.

"Better not," Ben told her. "Why make it worse than it is?"

"You can be awfully stubborn, Ben."

That was funny. Not funny enough to make him laugh. It drew his long lips out in a twisted, bitter smile.

"You are," she insisted. "I know my father is too, but you're even worse. If the two of you could only get together and talk it over sensibly . . . he really *is* willing for all of you to have a share of land."

"Sure. Six feet for every nester."

A WONDER that Beeler hadn't laughed out loud, Ben thought as he drove his herd along. Good thing he hadn't. He'd have got his teeth knocked down his throat. With Ella there they'd not dare throw lead. Frank Edmonds would kill the man who tried it.

No question that Edmonds loved his daughter. Hard as he was, he was not letting her know to what lengths he was going against the nesters. Ben supposed that Edmonds pictured it to her in the light of a respectable man defending his rights against the rabble.

Maybe that was the way Edmonds saw the matter. Like the rest of the big ranchers, he'd had his way so long he really thought he had the world fenced off. But Ella loved her father. She couldn't see that.

Not that Ben blamed her too much. He could never have loved a woman whose loyalty didn't go deep. Too bad it had to be divided. Ben's thoughts had strayed from his job. He suddenly found himself with a couple of strays to go after. He flagged one back to the herd with his hat. The other steer took more persuading. Ben had to use his rope.

He drove them onto Seeburg's land and let them mingle with the mixed brands that were lapping up the last of the water in Seeburg's puddle under the watchful eye of Seeburg's twelve-year-old, Danny.

The boy waved and Ben waved back. He had to pick his way through a litter in Seeburg's yard; Jed was the kind who never threw anything away. Seeburg himself sat on a small, sagging porch he had added to his cabin, a dead pipe in his mouth, his broken arm resting on an upended barrel.

"Good boy you've got," Ben said after an exchange of greetings.

"He is. Good shot, too, for a kid of twelve."

"Don't talk that way," Ben said sharply, trying to snap the man out of his morbid state. "We don't have to drag kids into our troubles."

"They're his troubles too. If I get killed he won't have a soul in the world."

"Well, you're not dead yet."

"No? We'll *all* be dead, in a few days. I see they got your water today. That's about the last of it."

"A few days is all we may need. After holding out this long, we can stick it the rest of the way."

"Sure," Seeburg said. His next words showed he hadn't been listening. "I been practising with my left hand. I shoot pretty good too."

"That's fine," Ben said heavily. "Keep practising. But don't go into town again until you hear from me."

It was the best advice Ben had to

offer. As long as the men stayed out of town there was little chance of trouble. It was good advice for himself too.

He spent the next day close to his own place, knowing that word would reach him quickly if anything were stirring. When nothing happened he heaved a sigh of relief. Another day gone.

Another day and another and another. Maybe he was kidding himself. Nothing was going to save them. Palmer and Seeburg were right. The troops wouldn't come and there'd be no election.

Ben forced himself to think of other things. He got down some old gear and spent the morning putting it in shape. He might never get to use it, but that was one of the things he shouldn't be thinking about.

By now Walt should be in Prescott, maybe even on his way back. It was a mistake not to have given the men at least an inkling of what he had in mind, Ben realized. It would help keep them quiet. A man can wait when he has something to look forward to.

Ben saddled up quickly and was on his way. He found Seeburg as he had left him and paused long enough for a bit of talk and encouragement. From there he went on to Palmer's place, and then down the line.

They were all in the same mood, a dark one, and without any hope. Ben was sorry now that he had made the long ride. At least it had taken most of his day and kept him active. By the time he headed home the sun was on its way down.

SLEEP came hard that night, and Ben Waterman was a man who liked his sleep. He allowed himself the luxury of a late arising, knowing the stage would roll into town in midmorning, as it always did on its return trip. His breakfast was meager, and then he took time to scrape the stubble from his face.

He was astonished at his slowness in getting started. He should have been anxious to get to town, and yet here he was dawdling around. Probably, Ben thought, because he didn't have much hope for Walts mission. Chances were that Walt had followed instructions, even to using his gun, and was now in some guardhouse.

Trying to shake himself from his mood, Ben drove his horse hard.

Everything was a bad omen. Overhead the sky was already a furnace. The broiling sun would suck the water out of the cattle as fast they could drink. It could suck the patience from men, as well. Walt had better be on that stage.

But there was no stage, Ben saw. He came in from the south and the long gray street stretched ahead of him. Except for a few horses, some buggies, and a couple of women who were getting their shopping done, the street was empty.

From behind Ben a hot breeze lifted dust and flung it past him and against the weatherbeaten fronts of the buildings. He tipped his hat back to keep the dust off his neck and slowed his horse.

"Waiting for the stage?" the express agent asked. Ben nodded. "He ought to be along any minute," the agent said.

The minute was a long one. It stretched to an hour, to several hours.

"Never knew him to be so late," the agent said. He'd gone out a half dozen times to peer down the road to the north.

He went out again now. This time he stayed quite a while, shading his eyes. His head bobbed up and down, sud-

denly, and he turned back to the open door.

"Here he comes now. And raising enough dust for twenty."

The stage thundered into town. It might be nothing special, Ben knew; perhaps just the driver figuring he had already lost most of his day's rest. The few hours during the heat of the day were all the time the driver had on this run.

THEN brakes were screeching and the horses, lathered, leaning back in the traces as the reins tightened. The driver got his feet down and stretched his legs and grinned silly at the agent, knowing he would be anxious to hear what had caused the delay.

Ben wasn't looking at the driver. He had his eyes glued on the door. It opened. A man got out, turned, put up his hand. A woman's hand took it. She stepped down daintily. That was all. No Walt.

"I didn't know about it until I got back to Vliet crossing," the driver was saying.

"Didn't know about what?" Ben asked sharply, seeing the look on the agent's face. The driver turned to Ben, his own expression sad.

"The stage to Prescott. The one I met the other morning. Must have been going for blazes. Hit a washout and landed in a heap at the bottom of a gultch. I didn't see it, of course, but they say it was fierce. Smashed to bits, including them that were in it. They doubled up the other run from Prescott until they get another stage. That's why I was held up."

"Everyone in it was killed?" Ben asked softly.

"Instanter, I guess, from the way I heard it. Better for them if they were. Well, I reckon when it's your turn you got to go."

BUT not that way, Ben thought. Walt didn't have to go that way. I sent him. I sent him when I knew there wasn't a chance in a million he'd succeed.

The driver was still talking, but he didn't know any more than he'd already told. Ben turned away, not wanting to hear it again, and crossed the street and went into the Cattlemen's House. He needed a drink.

He needed a drink badly, to burn down some of the hatred for himself that was eating him up. He could have gone himself if it was such a good idea. Instead he had stayed here to wait it out. Wait it out for what? Walt and Linc Palmer and the rest were right.

Ben threw a coin on the bar and his hand fell away and hit the butt of his gun. Well, there was an end to everything even to waiting. He heard the drumming of hoofs and the thud of feet on the porch outside and spun on his heel, his fingers closing on his gun.

It was Danny Seeburg, his face gray beneath his tan. He ran toward Ben.

"Mr. Waterman," he gasped.

"All right, son. Take it easy," Ben said, his steady nature reasserting itself. "What's up?"

"My father told me to find you. Mr. Palmer's been killed!"

"Killed! When? Who did it?"

"I guess that fellow Beeler. This morning," Danny told him, taking the questions in reverse order. "Mr. Palmer caught him stringing wire and they had a fight and Beeler shot him. Mrs. Palmer's near out of her head and so is my father. He's rounding up the men and he says they're coming in to straighten things up."

"You bet we'll straighten things up," Ben said. "Listen, boy. You get back there and tell them to stop at Palmer's place. They should find some

ballots there. Voting ballots, hear? Tell them to bring them along."

"Yes sir," the boy said.

And then he was running for the door. Ben stood for a moment, his big hand pounding up and down on the bar. First Walt Homer and now Linc. Two men who had lost their lives without a chance to fight back. All because of Ben Waterman.

Yet he could not take all the blame. He was not being fair to himself. Walt's case had been an unavoidable accident. And Linc should not have lost his head.

A man cannot give up in an instant the habits of a lifetime. Ben was coming back to normal, his mind sliding into well-worn grooves. Maybe a fight was inevitable. Maybe not. Edmonds wasn't afraid, but a show of force might make him think twice. He would have losses too. That was why Ben had sent for the ballots. It was still the election which was most important.

HE PULLED himself away from the bar and went outside in time to see Danny disappearing down the road. It wouldn't take him long at the rate he was going.

There was someone else on the road, coming in toward town. Whoever it was seemed to be in an awful hurry, Ben thought. He watched the oncoming rider cut across Danny's path. The boy went off the road without a moment's hesitation and kept going.

Not a friend, in that case. Ben loosened the belt about his hips and made certain his gun would not catch in his holster. He stepped down off the porch and waited.

But it was not an enemy either. Ben's eyes widened as he got his first good look at the oncoming horse. He'd recognize that white starred forehead anywhere. It was Ella Edmonds' horse. Ella was riding him, and riding him as though the devil were right behind her.

Ben was waiting at the rail when she flung herself from her saddle. He caught her, helped her down, and saw how frightened she was.

"Ben," she said, "I've got to talk to you!"

"All right. Come on inside, out of this sun."

It wasn't like her to act this way. She took the steps at a jump and crossed the porch fast. Ben took a long step and was right behind her when she went through the door.

"Let's have it now," he said quietly.

"You've got to get out of town, Ben! I don't know what it's all about, but my father has rounded up all his men and they're riding in. There's going to be trouble."

"Going to be? There *is!* Plenty of it. Beeler killed Linc Palmer this morning."

"I didn't know. Anyway, Ben, it's you I'm worried about. Please get out before it's too late."

"It was too late the minute your father tried to run out the nesters. But thanks for the warning anyway. Now you'd better be on your way. This is going to be a hot place soon."

He was practically pushing Ella out of the door. She made an attempt to brace herself against the door and Ben had to pull her away.

"Don't be foolish," he told her. "It won't do either your father or me any good if you get hurt. Go on across to Carmer's. And stay inside no matter what happens. Keep behind the counter and away from the window. Understand? Keep away from the window!"

He waited only long enough to see her start across. Then he ran back inside. He had to think. But the man behind the bar was hurriedly putting bottles away.

"I guess I'd better close," he said. His chin was blue wih fright.

"You close now and you might as well stay closed," Ben snapped. "Go upstairs if you're afraid of getting hurt."

There was going to be some reply. But what it was Ben never heard. For it was just as he moved toward the man behind the bar that he heard Ella's cry.

Ben's response was instantaneous. His heavy body kept moving, but now it was in a sharp turn that brought him around facing the door. He cleared the few yards of space in a rush and hit the door with his shoulder and went on through.

He was across the porch and jumping the steps before his mind registered what his eyes saw. Ella and Bull Saxon!

SAXON had the girl caught in the crook of his huge arm. His face was fixed in a moronic leer that was more frightening than his clumsy attempts to caress her with his free hand.

"It's all right, honey," he boomed reassuringly. "Bull Saxon is working for your old man."

Her answer was a raking blow that caught his cheek and drew blood. Ben's heart sank as the leer was wiped off and replaced by a flash of anger. Saxon could kill the girl with a slap.

Still on the run, Ben dug at his holster. But that was no good. He might hit the girl. Then, with only a few feet to go, Saxon saw him coming. He tried to let the girl go. But she too had seen Ben, and her reaction was faster than Saxon's. Instead of leaping away she grabbed his arm.

It threw him slightly off balance.

All the weight of Ben Waterman's body was in the punch he threw. It caught Saxon below the ear. Big as he was, he staggered under it. Before he could recover he had taken another

Now Ella was out of the way and Ben was bulling in. He almost laughed as Saxon's nose splintered under the force of a punch. Then Saxon's arm came up and warded off another smash at his head. Ben dropped his attack to Saxon's body.

But that was not like hitting human flesh. Saxon was as hard as rock. The force of Ben's weight and momentum pushed him back but he was not being hurt. Realizing what had to come, Ben tried to halt his forward motion. If he could clear some space between him and Saxon there would be a chance to use his gun.

He forgot the gun as Saxon's fist caught him a glancing blow and spun him around. Now it was Saxon who was taking the offensive. He crowded in close, giving Ben no chance to reach for his gun.

Ben dodged a punch that would have crushed his head, ducked another aimed at his body. He saw an opening and brought up his knee and heard Saxon grunt in pain. And then Saxon's paw came around in a slap that lifted Ben off his feet and flung him on his back in the dust of the street.

Dazed and falling, Ben was helpless. It was with no conscious effort on his part that his hand moved. One moment he was on his feet. The next moment he was on his back and there was the cool feel of the gun in his hand, and above him Bull Saxon with his foot lifted and ready to come down.

Ben shot without aiming. He saw Saxon's head jerk back and up and there was suddenly a red rimmed hole below the chin. There was no need to shoot again. Saxon was falling, coming down with a crash like a felled tree.

Someone had Ben's arm and was trying to lift him. He made an attempt

to fight off the hand before he realized it belonged to Ella.

"I'm all right," Ben said. He came slowly to his feet and shook himself back to alertness and holstered the gun. "Did he hurt you?"

"No. I'll have a bruise or two. That's all."

"Good. Let's get you into Carmer's now."

Disregarding her protests, Ben marched her to the store and pushed her inside. "Stay away from the window," he reminded, and was satisfied when she nodded.

He slammed the door behind her and turned away. He was hardly surprised to find the street empty except for Saxon's body. Evidently there were none of Saxon's friends around. The townspeople were keeping out of sight; they always did.

BUT the street was not empty for long. Ben caught the strike of heels on the hard earth and a second later Kensel came around the side of the saloon. The marshal was moving faster than usual but he paused when he saw Ben.

Kensel took in the big nester standing in the center of the street. Then his glance shifted to Saxon's body. It didn't take much to figure this out. And it was a kind of figuring at which Kensel was good. His lips lifted in a slow, thin smile.

"So this is how it is," he said, and he was moving forward slowly now. "This is how it is, Waterman. He didn't have a gun and you shot him down."

"Not quite," Ben said.

"That's the way it is to me," Kensel said. "And I'm the law around here."

Ben's back was suddenly icy cold as he saw that Kensel had pulled up. The marshal had stopped a good thirty feet away. The skin on his face was pulled tight with eagerness. "You made a brag, Waterman," he said. "You were going to tramp on my toes. Here's your chance."

Then his lips were spouting curses and his hands were clawing at the butts of his guns. His draw was too hurried, his aim not steady. A bullet kicked up dust at Ben's feet and another missed him by yards and slammed against the front of the Cattlemen's House.

Ben's own draw was slower, but smooth and even; his trapped breath filled his chest and he kept his arm swinging up until Kensel's star glinted even with the barrel of the gun.

Pulling the trigger was like pulling the gallows' trap on a man. Kensel's legs jerked and his head came up sharply. He half turned and fell onto his face in the dust and did not move.

There was a sickness now at the pit of Ben's stomach. He was no hand for killing. Then his head lifted slowly and he thought it was strange, the things a man could do when he had to.

And when he heard the sound of many horses close on the road Ben did not pause to wonder if they were friend or foe. He stepped out of the center of the street and leaned back against a rail and waited. No use running. They were near enough to see him as surely as he could see them.

He turned his head and saw it was Edmonds.

The big black gelding glistened with sweat, and in the hot clear sunlight Edmonds' silvery hair reminded Ben of the white rock. It would be just as easy as that, Ben thought. His gun was still in his hand.

But that was something to which he could not bring himself.

So he stood there with his back

against the rail and waited until Frank Edmonds' men were all around him and Edmonds himself was leaning down out of the saddle, his face bleak. Already he had seen the two bodies on the street.

"You had the gall to wait," he said. 'Not that it matters. We'd have caught up with you anyway."

His head jerked back to Kensel's body, swung around again to Ben.

"You wanted an election, Waterman. Did you think you'd get it this way?"

"We'll be needing some new law around here now and that's a fact," Ben said gently. He thought Edmonds was going to hit him, but the older man drew his arm back.

"The law is with the side that has the most guns, Waterman. You should have remembered that." His eyes shifted to his foreman. "All right, Beeler. He's a killer. You know what to do."

BEN sucked in a breath and he swung his wrist upward. A hand caught the gun and twisted it out of his grasp before he could fire. But Beeler was not watching that. He had swivelled about in his saddle and his eyes were glued to the south road.

"Someone coming," he said to Edmonds. "Looks like the nesters."

"Good. We'll put a finish to this thing. Get some men under cover."

Ben's mind raced desperately. Seeburg and his men were going to ride into an ambush. They were outnumbered, but even that was not enough for Edmonds. He was going to make certain.

"Ella!" Ben's voice rose in a shout. "Ella!"

Edmonds was taken completely by surprise. His jaw dropped and he stared at Ben. Then he caught sight of Ella as she stepped out of Carmer's store. His own shout went up now.

"Beeler! Hold it!" Edmonds made certain that Beeler had the men moving back into the street. Then he turned to his daughter.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Without hesitation she told him. Ben watched an amazed and slightly horrified expression flit across the man's face as he heard that his daughter had ridden into town to warn his enemy.

"Good grief, girl, don't you realize that this man is a killer?"

Beller and his men were in front of Kensel's body, hiding it from view, but Saxon lay in clear sight. Edmonds pointed to the dead man as proof of his assertion.

Ben was breathing a little easier now. Whatever came would be in the open. The nesters were already in town and drawing close. Edmonds saw them but made no sign; his men sat quiet.

"I warned you about Bull Saxon," Ben said. "This time it was Ella he went after. That's what started the fight."

The older man's lips had curled inward. He bit down hard. His eyes went back to Saxon's body and he made an involuntary gesture toward his gun.

Beeler was back again, pushing his way between them.

"What about Kensel?" he said. "You can't deny you gunned him down."

Edmonds nodded sharply and glared at Ben. His daughter stared wide eyed at him. "Dad! What are you trying to do? I saw the whole thing from Carmer's window. Kensel was first to draw and first to fire. Ben hadn't made a move at his gun."

"I thought I told you to stay away from the window!" Ben blurted angri-

ly. He had to laugh at himself as soon as the words were spoken.

"I didn't know," Edmonds said. He sounded confused, and the confusion was catching.

His men were at a loss without his leadership. While they waited for Edmonds to make up his mind, and while the silver haired man stared slack mouthed at Ella, Jed Seeburg and the other nesters moved in around them. Every one of the nesters had his gun unholstered.

"You all right, Ben?" Seeburg said.

"Sure."

"Then step out of range." Seeburg's voice went up. "We want Beeler, Edmonds."

BEELER went white with fear and he stuck close to his boss. Edmonds looked at him and bit down on his lips. Ben knew what Edmonds was thinking. Beeler was his foreman. He couldn't hand him over without losing face.

"Palmer started the fight," he said.

"Never mind that," came Seeburg's reply. "We're calling the tune right now. Get him out here."

That was more than Edmonds would take. Ben saw his fingers slide along the saddle, where they had been resting. He was going to go for his gun.

"Wait a minute," Ben said. "Beeler will get a fair trial. No necktie party." He looked past Edmonds. "Can I promise that, Jed?"

Seeburg shot a quick glance around before he replied.

"All right, Ben."

It was all Edmonds could have hoped for. He had his way out and he was taking it. His decision came at once and it showed on his face. When Beeler went for his gun it was Edmonds who struck his hand down.

"Good enough," Edmonds said. Anything else?"

"The fences," someone called.

"They come down today."

Edmonds looked his age then. Every year had its own line in his face. His shoulders sagged as he turned to ride off. But Ben was calling him back.

"The most important thing, Edmonds. We want a fair and square election, with a chance to vote in our own man and our own law; and they'll both be the kind that give no one an edge."

Edmonds was turning back. His eyebrows were suddenly arched in a thoughful smile.

"You make it sound pretty good," he said. "I think I'll buy."

His words rang true. This was no concession under pressure. A cheer came up from the nesters and Edmonds looked at them and then back at Ben.

"I guess you really had something worth fighting for," he said.

"Worth waiting for, too," Ben told him. Ben's arm reached out and encircled Ella's waist and drew her close to him. "Like everything good," he added.

WESTERN GUNMAN—JOHN SLAUGHTER

JOHN SLAUGHTER made the kind of sheriff badly needed by the West in the eighties, when the country had to be made safer, and less wild and lawless. He had great courage, ability with weapons, hatred for crooks of all kinds, and contempt for the quibbles and technicalities of lawyers. Many individuals were stronger than the law in those days, but John Slaughter was an individual who was tougher and stronger than the lawbreakers he hunted. Arizona remembers him as one of her real pioneers, a man who fought and struggled to help create a great state out of a savage wilderness.

Slaughter's size did not play an important part in the impressive power of the man. His height was a good six inches less than the six feet or more boasted by many of the brawny Westerners of his day. But he was bronzed and hard from

out-door life, and his dark, penetrating eyes commanded respect, revealing the strong character he possessed.

John Slaughter grew to manhood on the vast ranges of Texas, and he knew cattle as few other men have known them. In the boom time after the Civil War he took his herds up to Kansas, then began trailing herds from Mexico to Arizona, where he had a ranch. While very remunerative, it was a dangerous business. Chihuahua and Sonora swarmed with bandits, and the Apaches were an ever-present menace. Slaughter, with eyes wide open to the odds against him, went his way with determination, minding his own business, but on the alert for those who would mind it for him. He made many trips into Mexico, carrying thousands of dollars on each trip, and buying Mexican steers to take back to Arizona through Apache country.

One story is told which illustrates Slaughter's way of facing danger. In Mexico one day, with several thousand dollars in his pockets, he heard that a gang of bandits was planning to murder him and his men to get the money. The Mexican cowboys with him deserted, leaving Slaughter with only two men in his party. Undaunted, the three left the village at dusk, chose good fighting ground, and waited. The bandits soon followed their trail, and came racing along. Slaughter and his party, from their sheltered position, met them with a deadly fire of lead. The bandits turned and ran, and Slaughter calmly went on about his business of buying cattle.

SLAUGHTER became well known in Arizona, and had many friends, for men knew that he was straightforward and dependable. He also had many enemies, as he had a deadly hatred for crooks, especially rustlers and horse thieves. Having gained his possession in the face of terrible danger and hardships, he highly resented having any of them stolen. He declared his own martial law, and remorselessly pursued and executed any man who dared try to steal his cattle or horses. He acquired a reputation as an extremely dangerous man when facing an enemy. yet he did this in an unspectacular fashion, with no boasting or flashy gunplay such as many gunmen of those days used, but rather with the quiet efficiency of a man protecting his rights, and no fooling. He did not notch his gun. Many times his outfit was trailed by outlaws who wanted the money he carried, but seldom did one have the nerve to buck his fury and his gunplay. Slaughter went his grim, efficient way, seeming to bear a charmed life.

Cochise County, Arizona, in 1886, badly needed a clean-up. The days of greatest mining prosperity were over, the wildest times of easy money were gone, and many men had turned to a life of minor crimes. The place was overrun with petty thieves. Around Tombstone, people found the conditions intolerable, and John Salughter's name began to be mentioned as one who might effect a change. He was asked to run for sheriff.

He took office in 1887, at decided financial loss to himself. It was a chance to really work at his hatred of rustlers, his determined prejudice in favor of law and order. He went about his job with typical forthrightness, efficiency, and ruthlessness.

He did not have much use for the courts. Neither did a great many other respectable people of that day. The penalty for most major crimes was death, anyway, and besides, he was convinced that habitual criminals could not be cured. His method was to get rid of them, either by scaring them out of the county or by ending their lives himself.

He usually went alone when on the trail of a criminal. With his famous white-handled six-shooter in its holster, and his Winchester in his saddle scabbard, his pursuit was relentless. He might bring back stolen horses or cattle, but seldom did he bring back any criminals. His methods were more direct. He did not speak of the men he had killed, and did not wish to be considered a gunman.

IN THE county their lived a wealthy Mexican named Soto. Slaughter became convinced that Soto was head of a gang of outlaws which engaged in horse stealing, cattle rustling, occasional holdups, and a murder now and then. The evidence he collected was sufficient for Slaughter, if not for a jury. Then there was a double murder of cattle buyers, and Slaughter was aroused to immediate action. He took Soto prisoner, charged with the double murders. Soto was tried in court, but the evidence was insufficient, and the man was freed. But Slaughter knew that Soto was guilty. A few days later he faced the Mexican, and gave him an ultimatum. He was to leave the country, within a set time limit. The story goes that Soto blustered and protested, but when the deadline came, he was gone.

He went only to a nearby county, however, and soon there were other mysterious crimes. Slaughter knew who had committed them, or at least engineered them. One day Soto disappeared for good. He lived outside Slaughter's bailiwick, but Slaughter hated criminals. He was always riding out of Tombstone, alone, and he did not talk of his deeds. Rumor had it that "Slaughter's way" had worked once more, in getting rid of a crook.

When Slaughter's term as sheriff expired, he left Cochise County a far better place for honest men and women to live. He retired to his ranch near the Mexican border, a place of a hundred thousand acres, and carried on his cattle business there for some thirty years, until his death in 1922. One of the leading citizens of the State, he had played an important part in making it a good place to be.

—MILDRED MURDOCH

The Mexican Shaft

by Mike Ludwick

The rustlers didn't know very much about the shaft except that it was a nice safe place to bury a man—dead or alive. . .

WELL, by the Great Horn Spoon! Did ever anyone see the like of that? What in heck are they doing, anyhow?"

Bob Vail peered cautiously through the screen of Brigham brush that fringed the edge of a lofty rimrock. It was late twilight but he could see every detail of the scene in the little valley below.

Several buckaroos were apparently engaged in currying a number of white horses. However, as they worked, they frequently dipped what seemed to be their currycombs into buckets of liquid of some kind, and gradually the "curried" portions assumed darker colors.

"Painting them! Dyeing-them! Can you beat that? Making blacks and grays out of the white horses and changing the buckskins into pintos! No wonder McPherson can't get any trace of the white horses he loses! Pretty clever stunt! Have to hand it to these rustlers."

The valley was a small one, hardly a mile in length. A streamlet issued from springs at the upper end and lost itself in a luxuriant meadow in the center of the gently sloping basin. There was a wide and well defined trail where the southern end of the valley sloped up to the rimrock. It ended abruptly there and no outlet could be seen from where Vail lay.

As he watched the scene closely, a riata swished through the air and pinned his arms to his sides. Three burly brutes threw themselves upon him and although he struggled desperately and lashed out with his feet until their shins and bellies must have been black and blue for days, they were too much for him. He was bound securely and relieved of his brace of sixguns and the small, pearl-handled one in his shoulder holster.

"You're pretty smart, Mr. Vail, but not quite smart enough!" Jasper Holt mocked, his beady black eyes twinkling maliciously. He was the biggest and most brutal looking of the trio, with a large-nostrilled, flat nose whose ugliness had been enhanced by being broken in some brawl, and thick, sensual lips. "Your cayuse back there in the timber gave you away by whinnyin' when our horses passed. You'd orter ride a mare. Don't whinny so much at passin' horses. The A-rabs taught us that.

"So you was spyin' on us, was you? Well, we knowed that some time ago. We've knowed you was an Association dick paid by McPherson ever since the night when two of our men eavesdropped under the office window at the White Horse Ranch. They overheard you and Daggett and Mac considerin' ways and means of puttin' us

Bob Vail struggled desperately as the men lowered him into the opening. He knew that once he hit the bottom of that inky black shaft he might never see sunlight again...

behind bars."

"Yep, we reckon you've figgered out what we're doin', Vail, Roundin' up Mac's white and gray horses and his buckskins and dyein' 'em. Sure! With real hair dye. No Diamond dyes for us. *Hair dye!*" One of the villainous crew guffawed. "Costs like hell but it's worth it. Kinda smart ourselves, don't you reckon, Mr. Vail?"

MAYBE so you wonder how we get in and out," Jap Holt mocked. "See where that trail runs slap up to the rimrock at the south end and stops? Well, there's a crack in the rimrock there, barely wide enough to let a horse and rider pass. Reckon Godamighty put it there just for us poor, lousy, lowdown, ornery rustlers to use. There's a bob wire gate there, too." And Holt and the rest laughed uproariously. "Probably you've passed right by it and never suspected it was there. We got a half-breed that's an expert at hidin' sign. Uses a saddleblanket to sweep out hoofprints and a few old clumps of sagebrush cut off and set down in the trail and lookin' as if they had been growin' there for forty year. There's tricks in all trades, Vail. You wouldn't by any chance want to throw in with us, would you?"

"Sure! As soon as hell freezes over!" was Vail's contemptuous reply.

"What we goin' to do with him, Jap?" Hank Avery asked anxiously. He was one of the White Horse riders, tow-headed with pale blue eyes, a colorless personality. "Tie him up to a nutpine and let the coyotes and mountain lions finish him?"

"I vote we shoot him and leave him for the coyotes," Toby Thompson put in viciously. Toby was a Holt rider, Mexican.

"What you say we incarcerate him in what Jules Vergon calls the 'oobly-ette?' " Holt suggested.

"Suits me," Hank agreed.

"I'd rather see the damn buttinsky perforated right now," Toby insisted.

"He can't never get out of the shaft," Holt ended the argument.

Hank fetched Vail's horse and they rode north towards the hills that overlooked the White Horse Ranch. Vail's feet were tied together with a buckskin thong passing under the belly of his mount, his hands bound to the saddle horn.

"What you reckon caused the dang thing, anyhow, Jap?" Hank asked after a lengthy silence.

"What? Oh, you mean the 'oobly-ette'. Some say it's a blow-hole and some claim it's the shaft of an old Mexican mine made long before the whites came into the country. I think myself it's an old mine because the corners is squared. In solid rock. Never caved a foot since it was made. Fifty feet deep and sides straight up as a plumbline. Reckon that will hold Mr. Vail till we move this herd, anyhow!"

They moved slowly up a steep slope of the Santa Ritas. Only the jangling of spurs, the creaking of saddle leather and the occasional yipping of a distant coyote broke the silence of the night.

AT THE TOP, Vail's captors dismounted and cut the thongs which bound his hands and feet. They were so numb that when Holt yanked him roughly from the saddle he fell heavily. He made no effort to rise. Apparently the fall had dazed him.

"Hand me a lass rope," Holt commanded and approached to loop it under Vail's arms.

"Why not dump him in with his

hands and feet tied?" Hank asked.

"He'll live longer and suffer more this way," Jap grinned. "We'll throw him in what grub we got in our saddlebags and he can get all the water he needs like Sandy Burns did. There's a lot of things he could tell us if he wanted to that we'd like to know. There's nothin' like a good hot brandin' iron to loosen a man's tongue."

Vail rose totteringly to his feet. He had not been as dazed and numb as he had pretended. He lunged at Holt and landed a right on that heavy chin that would have felled an ox. Holt stumbled against a boulder and fell heavily. Vail's left foot tripped the surprised Toby while his left hand struck him a backhanded blow that sent him winding. Hank was easier. A swing to the jaw and a punch in the solar plexus put him out entirely.

Vail made a run for his own mount and sprang to its back without aid of stirrup. He lashed the other startled horses with his romal. They fled pell-mell down the steep and rocky trail; but before he could follow the fleeing animals and leave their owners afoot, Holt and Toby were upon him, clinging to his feet and bridle reins. In spite of his utmost efforts and the mad plunging of his horse, he was dragged off and hurled to the ground where he lay spent and bruised and bleeding, panting heavily. Toby raised his gun to bash his skull in but Holt stopped him. He adjusted the loop of his riata under Vail's arms.

"For two cents I'd throw you in head first!" he panted. "You damn sneakin' spy! Bring a light, Toby."

Toby lighted a sliver of fat pitch. Vail was dragged to the mouth of the shaft. With one end of the riata passed around a tree trunk and tied to the horn of Holt's saddle to control the speed of his descent, he was lowered roughly to the bottom of the shaft. Several times during the descent, his body whirled and his head struck the sides, although he used his feet as far as possible to avoid such blows that might have battered him into unconsciousness.

"Now loose the end of the lass rope so we can drag it up or we'll put a shot into your worthless carcass!" Holt yelled.

Vail felt like a man abandoned in mid-ocean and forced to surrender his life preserver to the occupants of a departing boat but there was nothing were dumped down the shaft from the he could do about it. Some parcels saddlebags of the rustlers.

'Got any matches?" Holt called.

"No. Throw me down some, won't you? And I'm about out of the makin's," Vail assumed a whining and wheedling tone.

"Singin' a different tone already, ain't you? Sure you ain't ready to throw in with us?"

"I'll think it over," diplomatically, in a hesitant tone.

They threw down a sack of Durham and papers and a block of short, pink-tipped sulphur matches, laughing uproariously—except Hank, who was still groggy.

"Here's some more pitch for torches. too," Holt shouted, "so you can explore your surroundin's!"

"Thanks for small favors!"

"Well, so long!" Holt called before they started away. "Vaya con Dios!"

"Adios! I'll be seeing you!" Vail prophesied, at which Holt, being no fortuneteller, laughed more loudly than ever.

"I wouldn't wonder if he'd be ready to talk in a few days from now," Holt said. "There's been leaks somewhere. I'd like to put a rope around the neck

of the traitor! Vail could tell us his name."

"Maybe we better go back and put a bullet in him," Hank said nervously, feeling of his sore chin gingerly. 'And I didn't see any use of your babyin' him the way you done."

"How the hell could he get out of there?" Jap answered. "There ain't no out. He's in there for life unless we to keep him from maybe goin' nuts let him out. I throwed him the makin's down there. It *has* happened, Hank," he said significantly.

VAIL lighted one of the pitch slivers and made a survey of his surroundings. He was at the bottom of a 50-ft. shaft whose sides and crudely squared corners bore evidence of human handiwork. A tunnel extended from one side into utter blackness. Swarms of bats hung head down from the roof. Some, disturbed by his presence and the light, circled around his head, almost extinguishing his torch. He set to work determinedly to explore the tunnel. It sloped steeply downward. At the farther end was a shallow pool of water seeping in under a pile of boulders. His torch nearly went out in a strong draft. He located its source in a crevice a few feet above the pool. He could hear the murmur of running water.

"By the great horn spoon!" he exclaimed, and his voice echoed hollowly from the walls. "Those ancient miners broke into a subterranean stream! That's why they quit! Might run underground for miles. Wish I knew where it comes out. Maybe it doesn't come out! And there might be a deep hole in it some place where a man wouldn't have a chance!"

He returned to the shaft. He was in no danger of dying from thirst or of starvation for some time at least. He had the grub the rustlers had thrown down, much to his surprise. Besides there were cans of food in niches in the walls of the drift which had evidently been there for some time. Some cans held matches and pieces of candles to protect them from the ravages of rats and mice. There were cans of coffee, lard, milk, tomatoes and fruit. Possibly this had been a bandit hideout. There were some old dry pinyon limbs also. He made a fire and boiled some coffee in a can.

"Wonder what object they had in sparing me," he pondered. "Maybe to hold me as a hostage in case the Association makes things too hot for them."

He sat down by his tiny fire to consider his chances for escape. If he had time and tools he could perhaps cut shallow steps in the face of the shaft: but he had not even a rusty pick or drill or single-jack; nothing but a pocket-knife.

The icy draft in the tunnel chilled him to the bone. He dare not use his small supply of fuel too freely. Disgustedly he made his way to a pile of dusty old blankets far back in the tunnel, carried them to the shaft shook them out well and lay down in them. He slept uneasily until the first rays of sunlight shone on the upper western face of the shaft.

After a cup of coffee and a couple of slices of bacon he set out for the tunnel's end. The rock around the crevice was badly cracked so by dint of great labor he managed to knock out several chunks of rock. All day he to enlarge the crevice so he could get worked, his only tool a stone in lieu of a singlejack. At last he was able his head through and see by the light of his torch a dark, swift stream and measure its depth with a limb of pinyon pine. From downstream came a

subdued roar.

"Falls! Lord knows how high!" When I get the hole big enough to crawl through I'll take a pasear up the other way and see what I can see."

Most of the next three days he worked, part of the time in darkness, striking hit or miss at the edges of the crevice for he must conserve his precious splinters of pitch for purposes of exploration. It seemed ages before the opening was large enough to admit of the passage of his body. He stripped naked.

"Better leave a torch here or I might miss my doorway when I return," he said aloud with a grin. "I'll have to stop this pernicious habit of talking to myself, when and if I get out of here!"

LEAVING a torch near the opening and carrying another, he crawled through and gasped as he let himself down into the icy torrent. The bottom was slippery and he had hard work to keep his footing, barefoot as he was. He waded carefully, but without the least warning he stepped off into a deep hole and came up half-strangled. His torch was extinguished. He started back shiveringly without a light to guide him. With a sigh of relief caught sight of the feeble glimmer of the torch he had left.

"No place like home!" he grinned sardonically, with chattering teeth, blue from cold as he crawled through the opening, lighted another sliver of pitch and padded back to his campfire.

"No use going any further that way, anyhow," The ceiling was getting lower all the time. Looks like I'll have to try the other way out."

He slept late the next morning. After a frugal breakfast he made preparations for departure. He collected all the charcoal from his own fires and those of his predecessors, burning most of his remaining fuel. He pulverized all of the charcoal finely. Then he rubbed his face and body with the lard in one of the cans in a niche. After that he rubbed the charcoal into his skin over his whole face and body. On a dark night he would be almost invisible.

"First time I ever craved to see myself in a looking-glass," he drawled. He donned his b.v.d's.

"Have to wear some kind of clothes or I might be arrested for indecent exposure! No telling what part of the world I'll come out in! Maybe in some rustler's back yard—if ever and when!"

He made a small, tight parcel of his shirt and trousers covered with a bit of canvas he found in the tunnel and tied it around his neck. He laid his boots flat on the tunnel floor just in sight of anyone at the mouth of the shaft. Across their tops he placed a pair of blankets folded and shaped to bear some resemblance to a human form.

"When they come back and don't get any response to their shouts and get a glimpse of this they'll think I was a weak sister and didn't hold out faithful very long."

He crawled through the opening and stepped gingerly into the water, It reached only half-way between hips and knees but was icy cold, and swift. In one hand he clutched a torch. Several bits of pitch were tied around his neck and with them his water-tight match case. He had made himself a stick from a pinyon branch but he barely saved himself from falling several times because of the slimy stream bed.

THE SOUND of falling water grew louder as he proceeded. The ceiling grew lower. He glimpsed a glimmer of light ahead of him. He had tucked an empty can with a tight lid inside his undershirt. Now he took it out and launched it on the stream. It was carried swiftly away and disappeared through an opening not far ahead. Above the roar of water he imagined he heard a faint, tinkling sound that might have been made by the can's striking a rock.

"O.K.!" he said. "The falls can't be very far away and this is a small body of water. I don't believe they're very high. Have to risk it, anyhow. Here goes nothing!"

At that instant his stick slipped and he fell heavily. He started down the steep incline feet first, clawing and trying vainly to get a handhold on something. He was whirled over a broad, slanting ledge and then over twelve-foot falls into a deep pool. He rose, unhurt but spluttering, strangling and gasping for breath.

The White Horse Ranch lay in a narrow and winding valley, the upper portion enclosed on three sides by lofty rimrocks that rendered fencing unnecessary except for a few rods of barbed wire at occasional gaps. There were a couple of padlocked pole gates.

A rider on a white mare passed through the small gate of the upper pasture and headed for one of the ravines. Its small stream discharged its waters into the creek which fed the pastures and rich meadows of the ranch. Instead of crossing it, the rider turned the mare's head up the stream. After the passage through the sagebrush and a strip of bare and burning sand, the white mare was glad to have her small, dainty feet in the cool water. In spite of the hampering bit, she bent her shapely head occasionally to snatch a luscious tidbit of grass or clover from the banks of the brook.

At last they reached a point where the ravine narrowed until the rider's outstretched hands could almost reach from wall to wall. The stream was deeper here, too. Here some poles had been placed to form a gateway. The rider bent to let them down and soon merged into a small, oval basin some two or three acres in extent, well grassed, containing clumps of aspens and pinyon pines. At the far end rose the tall rimrock. A score of feet above its base the stream broke through an opening in the cliff, flowed across a wide, slanting ledge and tumbled joyously into a deep pool, showering with glittering drops the tall ferns and velvety mosses of its banks and even the lower branches of the tremulous aspens.

ISABEL McPHERSON, commonly called Issie, removed the sadrle and bridle from the white mare and turned her loose to graze on the lush grasses, then seated herself at the foot of a friendly aspen. She fanned her flushed face with her sombrero. Ever since her mother's death several years before, she had sought the solitude of this picturesque spot for the solution of her problems. Her father himself had made the pole gate to bar stock from what she regarded as her own domain. On the hottest days in summer it was green and cool and lovely there, with rock ferns and columbine near the pool and scarlet penstemon and mallow lending vivid splashes of color to the more arid higher slope when the scorched range outside seemed to undulate dizzily through the merciless heat waves.

Issie puckered her brows as she concentrated on the problem which had been puzzling her. That was the ab-

sence of Bob Vail, the mysterious rider who had worked at the White Horse for the last month or so. He was a man in his early thirties, with a shock of curly black hair and long, sleepy eyes so darkly blue that she had thought them black until they had rested admiringly on her own for a single revealing instant. That intense gaze had awakened emotions hitherto foreign to the heart of the heiress of the White Horse. She had never lacked for suitors but never before had one been able to hold her interest.

She recalled a number of incidents that had aroused her curiosity. More than once she had seen her father and Daggett and Vail in close consultation in the office, always in the afternoon when the riders and other hands were away and about their work. Vail slept in the smaller of the two bunkhouses with three or four of the oldest hands. He was quiet and reserved but well liked by the men with the exception of two or three like Whitey and Truesdale, which was really in Vail's favor, she reflected.

There was some mystery connected with Vail, she was sure, but like a true daughter of the West, she made no inquiries, waiting as patiently as possible until her father or Daggett should choose to enlighten her. "Uncle Ed" as she called Daggett had been foreman of the White Horse Ranch before she was born. However, that would not prevent her from sniffing the air with her inquiring and freckled little nose and making certain deduction therefrom.

On the evening before Vail had left, as she sat by a window in her unlighted room, she had heard light footsteps that she recognized as his, pass down the long hall to the back porch after a long conference with her father and Daggett. She saw his tall, erect figure pass from sight beyond the woodshed.

"He doesn't want the men in the big bunkhouse to see him," she thought.

"Damned spy!" she heard someone hiss from an angle of the house where two men had been concealed with the object of listening in on the conversation in the office. "Damned lousy skunk! He'll get a bullet in his back one of these nights!".

She watched them as they moved off and belived she had recognized them as George Truesdale and Hank Avery, two of her father's riders from whom she had always shrunk instinctively.

The ranch was almost deserted the following day. Her father had ridden to Tres Pinos and Daggett was in the office working on some accounts. Old Wong, the cook, was taking his usual siesta and Billy, the choreboy, was asleep on the grass under a giant cottonwood. About three o'clock Vail returned, rode through the wide gate to the porch steps, trailed his reins and went into the office. On this occasion the office window was wide open and an occasional sentence reached the ears of the brazen young eavesdropper, mostly in Vail's voice.

"On top of Bighorn Butte—see a lot of country through these glasses—out in that malpais section—small valley—no well defined trails—bunch of horses—nearly all white—"

After inspecting her reflection in the mirror, she repaired to the vine-shaded porch. The glass had revealed a slim young girl of about twenty years in a sheer white dress and a blue sash that matched the color of her eyes, healthily tanned skin and rosey cheeks that had no need of rouge, lips that needed no lipstick, which was the prerogative of only a certain class of women never mentioned in polite so-

ciety at that time. Daggett tugged nervously at his long, tawny mustache as he said.

"Take care of yourself, my boy! They're bad hombres!"

"So long!" Vail replied. "If I have good luck I'll be back before daylight."

HE RAISED his hat to Issie and ran lightly down the steps. She noted the two guns in his holsters, the wellfilled cartridge belt. In another second he would have been off but the hypocritical and forward young woman in the hammock stopped him.

"Oh, Mr. Vail," she asked as she ran to the steps, "if you are going into town would you mind mailing a letter for me?"

"I'm sorry, Miss McPherson, but I'm not taking that trail this time." His jaw was set grimly.

"I hope wherever it leads you it will bring you back safely," she said in a low voice, laying her hand involuntarily on his arm.

"No matter where it leads, I'll be back," he answered.

His tone was so tender that it set Issie's heart to beating wildly. His long look held her spellbound while she discovered to her amazement that his eyes were deep blue instead of black. In another instant he had passed through the gate and sped up the road with a farewell wave of the hand.

"Uncle Ed, what's going on here?" she asked, poking her head inside the office door. After that ardent glance from Vail's eyes and her own heart's leaping response, she felt this mystery now concerned herself personally and she had a right to ask questions.

"What little girls don't know won't hurt them none," was all the satisfaction she got.

"He said *if he had good luck* he would be back before morning," she thought as she sat leaning against the trunk of the crooked old aspen. She knew that her father and the old foreman were worried. She leaned her head against the trunk. The low hum of bees, the breeze created by the falling water whispering in the boughs overhead, lulled her into drowsiness. Her eyes closed.

A tin can tumbled over the falls and struck a rock with a metallic clatter, but the sleeper did not stir. The can was quickly followed by a large, dark object that bounced over the ledge and struck the water with such force that she was well sprayed.

"For the love of Peter!" Issie gasped, awakened thus rudely.

A black head and face rose above the surface of the pool, its owner snorting, spluttering, gasping, half strangled.

"A Negro!" Issie gasped, springing to her feet, ready for flight, although she wore a gun in her holster that she could use with deadly effect. She had grown up amongst Indians and her father had kept a Chinese cook ever since she could remember but she had never been accustomed to colored people. Indeed, she had never seen more than two or three in her life.

A well remembered voice pleaded, "Don't go, Miss McPherson!"

At those words she clasped her hands tightly against her breast and stared incredulously at the weird figure in the pool.

"Bob Vail!" she ejaculated amazedly as he climbed out and stood dripping before her. "Where have you been?" She had commenced severely but ended with hysterical laughter in which Vail joined.

"I don't blame you!" he said. "I must be a sight!"

"You sure are! You look like you're

half starved, too!"

"You've said it! I could eat a 'biled owl' and relish it!"

"But where have you been?"

"I'll tell you when I've made my toilet. I'll be with you in a jiffy."

He dodged behind some bushes, removed his underwear, wrung it out and hung it on the bushes to dry which it did rapidly in the blazing August sunshine of southern Nevada. He donned the shirt and trousers which had come through almost dry tightly wrapped in the scrap of canvas. Then he came to sit beside the girl in the grass at the foot of the aspen.

"Now, Miss McPherson," he commenced.

"Issie, to you,—Bob!"

"Issie, then. Thank you. It's a long story. I believe I could talk better if I could get this soot off me but it can't be done without soap and I've seen nary a cake of that article since I saw you last!"

"You know that your father and other stockmen hereabouts have suffered heavy losses from rustlers during the last few years, and especially the last few months. The owners of horse ranches have been the heaviest losers, horses being so much more valuable than cattle. Also, thieves can make a quicker get-a-way with them because they can travel so much faster than cattle. The Association sent me here at the request of your father and a few others to see what I could find out concerning the identity of the rustlers."

"I heard Whitey tell Truesdale you were a spy!"

VAIL told her his story and how Hank and Toby and Holt had caught him napping and imprisoned him in the Mexican shaft.

"I sure was an easy mark that time!" he said disgustedly.

She turned pale when he told her of how the rustlers had lowered him down the shaft and of his escape.

"There may be others in this at the ranch besides Whitey and Hank and Truesdale," he told her. "Of course they will think they have finished me, or at least have me safe in an escape-proof prison and will relax their vigilance. They probably know nothing about the subterranean stream. Anyhow, none of the previous occupants of the shaft have ever tried to enlarge the crevice.

"You can tell your father and Daggett where I am and they can probably manage to get supplies to me without being observed. I need something better than charcoal to blacken my face and whole body. I need black clothes, black hat and shoes. I want to render myself as nearly invisible as possible in the dark. I want a pair of moccasins, too so I can move silently. I must have grub, blankets, and for the love of heaven, Issie, see that they bring me tobacco and matches! I had intended to wait till the moon was down and make the ranch-house. I'm practically invisible as it is but my makeup might not last long. I'm glad you appeared on the scene. I left my boots in the tunnel on my 'corpse'. It's been a long time since I went barefooted and I've noticed considerable cactus between here and the ranch-house."

"There's very little danger of anyone finding you here," Issie told him. "None of the men ever come here. This is my own private retreat. I'm sure only a few of the older hands know anything about it. Dad and I and Uncle Ed ride this part of the valley ourselves, so the buckaroos rarely come up this way. Nothing can get out because of the rimrock and we have good padlocks on the gates at

the gaps. I guess you know we run the best mares and colts up this way since we commenced to lose so much stock, and Sultan, the white Arab stallion has his own pasture out here except when he's in his paddock at the barn.

"Dad gets more for the white Arabs than any of the other horses. They say that white horses are rare even in Arabia. If you want a safe place to bed down I can show you one. Not even Dad or Uncle Ed knows where it is."

She led him to a shallow cave in the rimrock at one side of the falls. It was dry and a screen of sagebrush and serviceberry bushes concealed the opening.

"Probably where our primitive miners started another tunnel and then changed their minds," Vail said. "much obliged to aborigines or Aztecs or Moundbuilders or whatever! I'll sleep like a top here. Thank you very much, Issie."

"I'll just lope down and get some blankets and grub while the coast is clear," she said. "Everyone is gone except Wong and Billy. They're all used to my comings and goings, anyhow. When Dad and Uncle Ed come back I'll tell them you are here."

She returned in an amazingly short time, well laden with supplies.

"No one saw me," she said. "Billy was still snoring under the cottonwood and Wong was taking his afternoon nap. He won't have to cook supper tonight. 'Two hots and a snack', on Sunday, you know. He'll wonder who made such a raid on his pantry!"

She had brought a cake of soap and a basin. They heated some water and Vail washed off part of the grease and charcoal. They made coffee and had a picnic dinner on the grass.

LATE that evening McPherson and Daggett appeared with the supplies. They greeted Vail warmly.

"Ed and I have sure been worried about you, my boy," Mac said. He was a typical frontier stockman, stoutly built, straight-backed despite his sixty years white-haired with closely clipped gray mustache, nose like an eagle's beak and keen but kindly blue eyes. "We didn't want to spoil your play but we'd have butted in inside another twenty-four hours if you hadn't showed up."

"I know where the old Mexican shaft is," Daggett said. "I'd like to pen Holt and his whole outfit in there and feed 'em on bread and water until they starved to death! I can savvy now why nearly all our horses that have disappeared have been white and light-colored."

"I must make another trip in," Vail told them, "and learn if they intend to make a drive soon. I want to learn who all the members of the gang are."

"No use being too brash, young feller," Daggett warned. "We can trap them by guarding the portal and waiting for daylight. We can starve them out if necessary. Of course there might be another entrance."

"That's the trouble," Vail said. "I can't be sure whether Holt told me the truth or was just bluffing. Probably the truth because he was convinced I could never escape. But I want to make sure."

"Don't let anyone in on the posse except the ones you are absolutely sure of. Some that have claimed to have had loses might have done it for a blind. Four men on the cliffs are worth a dozen in the valley. *It's the element of surprise that always counts.* It's a good thing the rustlers haven't any dogs. Probably afraid the barking of dogs might make some buckaroo

curious and lead to the discovery of the hideout."

"I have an idea they'll take the Grapevine. Cutoff," Dagget mused. "It's the shortest to the state line."

"I want a black mare," Vail told them. "The least creaky saddle on the ranch; a suit of black clothes and black cap and black boots. There's a pair of black trunks in my warbag if you can get them. When I black my face and hands and put those black things on I'll be mighty near invisible. Can't be told from a shadow and slippery as a Hindu thug! Dark of the moon, now, too.

"If I shouldn't show up for twenty-four hours better get the posse together and raid the valley. We may not get the whole gang but some of the small fry will squeal. They always do."

The next night a black horse left Issie's retreat bearing a rider whose ancestors had apparently ranged the jungles of Africa. He was dressed in sable garments. There was no creaking of saddle leather to betray his presence. He wore no spurs and rode almost soundlessly, except for the sound of his horse's hooves. He took the trail to the north end of the valley. He made a long detour in order to approach his destination where the slopes were steepest, most thickly timbered.

HE TIED the mare in a dense grove of nutpines, shed his outer garments and exchanged his boots for moccasins. Where shadows were deep he was practically invisible.

"They ought to all be here by this time," he thought.

Had he not known the portal was there he would have missed it. It was a mere crevice in the rimrock, winding through it for some twenty yards. It was barely wide enough for the passage of a horse and narrowed so sharply at the top that a rider on a tall horse would be compelled to dismount or lie flat on the back of his horse.

Vail advanced cautiously, keeping to the dense shadows. He slipped noiselessly through the portal. The further end was closed by a stout gate topped with barber wire. A long shed just beyond the gate contained saddles and bits of riding gear. No one was on guard at the gate. From a corner of the shed he trained his night glasses on the group of men near a fire halfway up the small valley. He recognized some of them. With brushes and dye some of them were converting white horses and buckskins into coal blacks and grays and pintos. He slipped along in the shadows at the base of the cliffs until he was as close as he dared go.

"By God, boys, I'm so sleepy I can hardly keep my eyes open!" Sang out a giant of a man named Dunham. "What say we make a pot of coffee? Up all night and didn't get anything but a catnap today. If it wasn't for gettin' set to make the drive Thursday night I'd lay off for a day or two and catch up on some shuteye. But we've got a lot of the critters to go over yet."

The aroma of boiling coffee reached Vail's nostrils. He waited impatiently for he was anxious to inspect the cliffs and find if any other opening existed.

At last the rustlers quit for the night and started home. Apparently all the men left. Vail wondered that they would leave somewhere near twenty thousand dollars worth of horseflesh unguarded.

"There must be someone on guard around here," he thought. "Probably they'll leave a man at the portal."

Cautiously he commenced the circuit of the valley. He worked slowly towards the cabin almost hidden in a grove of nutpines. Here if anywhere a sentinel would be stationed. He heard no sound but as he rounded a corner of the cabin he came on one of the rustlers not twenty feet away.

"Put 'em up!" Vail ordered but the rustler reached for his gun.

Vail threw himself sideways behind a friendly tree trunk. Bullets sang around him like a swarm of angry bees. One imbedded itself in the tree trunk half an inch from his face and showered him with splinters. Another went through the top of his hat and another through a fold of his black shirt, barely creasing the skin. His own gun spurted fire until it was empty. The rustler staggered and fell heavily, face down, his empty gun clanging against a stone. His body twitched a few times and lay still, sprawled grotesquely. Vail approached cautiously, turned the man over. Looked at his face by the light of a match whose light he shaded with his hat.

"Dead! Toby Thompson! They left him here on guard. He must have slept all evening and someone woke him before they left without my noticing it. Maybe there's someone else here. By the Great Horn Spoon! I'm the greatest imbecile alive. Me with my guns empty!"

HE RELOADED hastily as he heard the clatter of approaching hoofs. A rider on a white horse dashed towards the shack.

"Hello the house! Hey Toby! What's all the shootin' about? Tryin' out your new gun on the coyotes? Or did your gun go off accidentally?"

There was no answer. The rider caught sight of the prone figure and flung himself from the saddle.

"Dead!" he muttered. "My God! Couldn't be he shot himself?"

"Hands up!" Vail stepped from behind a tree.

The rustler shot from his knee, beside the dead man. He fired wildly but it was like shooting at a shadow. When the fusillade ended he lay as still as Toby.

"Truesdale as I'm a sinner!" Vail said. "Reckon the others will conclude they had a row and shot it out. Wonder if any more of the gang will show up."

He waited anxiously for awhile in the shadows of the pine grove but no one else appeared. He finished the circuit of the walls, keeping close to the base of the rimrock. Not far from the cabin he found a cleverly constructed ladder which reached to a crevice in the face of the cliff. Where there were no footholds in it, small lengths of pine limbs had been wedged into the crevice from side to side, forming a ladder tolerably easy of ascent. He could discover no other means of egress from the place.

Scarcely had he completed the circuit and was approaching the portal when he heard the ring of steel-shod hooves on stone. A man leading a magnificent snow-white stallion appeared at the gate, his own mount following. He turned to close the gate. Vail stepped forth noiselessly from the shadows behind the shed.

"Up with your hands!" he snapped.

Hank Avery was an arrant coward and it is improbable he would have gone for his gun. However, he had his hands full with the white stallion which reared and came down with his forefeet perilously close to Hank's head. In a moment more Vail had him properly trussed up and one his own mount as Hank had helped to bind him a few nights before.

"Say, you damn idiot, what do you mean?"

"I'm going to do just what you did to me. Inside a couple of hours you'll be in the old shaft where you left me."

"*Vail!* For the love of God!"

"Yes, Vail himself! You thought I was either dead or crazy by this time, didn't you? But I fooled you! If you'll loosen up your tongue and answer a few questions it may help a little."

"Godamighty, man, don't shut me up there alone!" Hank pleaded. "I'll tell anything you want to know."

He gave Vail the names of all the rustlers, some unknown to him. Vail gave a peculiar whistle. A grazing black horse lifted his head and sprang into instant flight, skimming lightly as a bird across the meadow until it was nearly on Vail, then stopped short, his ears pricked forward, his nostrils quivering. He had recognized his master's signal but there was something wrong about this scent of oil and lampblack. Vail stroked the arching neck and sensitive muzzle.

"No sugar this time, old boy! I'll give you some first chance I have. Damn curs painted you, too, but it'll wear off."

HE TIED the white stallion securely, led Hank's mount with its rider's hands and feet securely bound, through the portal, his own horse following. He sprang lightly to its back and set out for the grove where he had left the black mare. He found her safe and was soon on his way to the Mexican shaft. It was nearing dawn when he lowered the pleading and protesting Hank down the shaft with the aid of two riatas passed around the trunk of a tree and tied to his saddle horn.

"You can't do it, Vail! For God's sake, man, it's murder!"

"Sure it is!" his captor replied unfeelingly. "You did it to me. I was lucky but I don't believe you will be as lucky as I was. There's plenty of water and some grub left."

"Where's Hank and Truesdale?" Daggett asked at breakfast.

"Don't know," one of the men answered. "Said they were headed for Tres Pinos last night. Probably sleeping off a spree in the hoosegow right now! Maybe waiting for you to come and bail 'em out!"

"They can stay there till they rot, for all of me!" the old foreman snorted.

Great was the consternation of the rustlers when they discovered the bodies of Toby and Truesdale.

"To think after all these years those fellers'd shoot it out like that! Wonder what they got to augerin' about," was Whitey's comment.

"Maybe Toby thought nobody but him was on the job and when Trudy came up he took him for another Association Dick," hazarded another. "Couldn't have been Hank done it—he's too much of a coward to jump one man, let alone two."

"Anyhow Hank delivered the white stallion as he agreed."

"What the hell we goin' to do with 'em?" One of the men asked Holt.

"Better shove 'em under right now. They ain't got no relations nohow. Old man McPherson or Daggett might try to get track of 'em but I don't reckon they care a terrible lot about 'em at that. Of course Hank will have to be told."

They wrapped the two bodies in blankets and buried them in shallow graves. There were no services. What the buzzards had already done to their remains was not pleasant to contemplate.

No one wanted the job of watchman

that night so Holt was compelled to take over the task himself. After the rest had gone he sat on the cabin doorstep calculating the amount the herd would bring on the other side of the state line. Some of the thoroughbreds would command fancy prices. The white Arabian stallion was the gem of the collection. A black shadow detached itself from the rest of the shadows.

"Hands up!" rang out a stern command. Holt's hands went up.

"Well, stranger, you've got the drop on me this time! But no swine can hold up Jap Holt and get away with it!" he said, as a gleam from the dim light in the cabin shone on Vail's face.

HE THREW himself forward and grabbed at Vail's legs, but Vail was an old hand at that game. He jumped backwards in time to evade the clutching hands. Holt lost his balance and would have rolled in the dust even if Vail's gun had not cracked down savagely on his head. When consciousness returned he was bound hand and foot.

"What'll you take to turn me loose, Sambo?" he asked.

"Everything you've got in the world wouldn't be half enough to turn the trick, Holt!" The rustler recognized his voice.

"Vail! For God's sake, man, how come you got out of the shaft?"

"Yes, it's Vail, not his ghost! And in a short time you'll be in the shaft where you left me. Maybe Hank's ghost is haunting the place by now. There'll be plenty of ghosts, don't worry! Toby and Truesdale didn't kill each other as you figured. I accounted for both of them, myself. I don't reckon you and Hank will be as lucky in escaping as I was. You wouldn't have the guts for it!"

Holt's whining and whimpering made no impression on Vail's grim determination. At dawn he was lowered down the shaft to keep Hank company.

On the appointed night a dozen or more of hard-riding straight-shooting stockmen arrived at the rendezvous. A few were posted on the rimrock and the rest gathered near the portal.

"I wish we could have had the sheriff with us," McPherson said, "but we couldn't trust him. He and Dunham and Holt have been thick as three in the bed and two in the middle. They helped elect him last election."

In the valley the horses had been rounded up into a compact herd, the mules and packhorses loaded, the diamond hitches thrown; the saddle horses champed their bits nervously, the riders were anxious to be off: and still Holt did not appear.

"I can't imagine what the hell's keepin' Jap!" Dunham said nervously. "He ain't showed up for the last two days. He was to come over to my place this afternoon but I hain't seen hair or hide of him. Hank hain't showed either but he delivered the stallion. What say we start now, anyhow? If Jap's comin' he can catch up with us."

They voted to start. Some of the men were plainly apprehensive. Two of them drew close together.

"I don't like this about Holt," one said in a low tone.

"Dunham was the last one with him and the last one to see Toby and Trudie alive. These deaths and mysterious disappearances is comin' too fast and too close together."

"Me too, pardner. Maybe he figgers the fewer there is the bigger each man's share of the loot. But watch your step, Bob."

They shoved the herd gently towards the portal. As the foremost

rider neared the gate a dark figure emerged from the shadows.

"Halt! In the name of the law! We've got you covered! There is a posse of armed men here all good shots. Better for you if you surrender peaceably, Dunham!"

"Who's tellin' us?" Dunham asked.

"Bob Vail, deputy U.S. Marshal and 'Association dick' as you called me. The man that Toby and Hank Avery and Holt left to die at the bottom of the old Mexican shaft. You know where Toby and Truesdale are. Holt and Hank are down in the old shaft themselves.

"You lie!" Dunham shouted defiantly. "That damn double-crossin' Holt has give us away! Ride 'em down, boys!"

HE URGED the herd towards the portal. There came a burst of fire from the men behind the gate. The frightened horses. whirled and fled madly towards the upper end of the basin. Some of the riders surrendered, others sought shelter behind tree trunks and boulders. Dunham and a couple of his men retreated to the cabin. From that vantage point they delivered a furious barrage at the posse advancing Indian fashion from tree to tree and boulder to boulder.

The members of the posse on the rimrock, unnoticed by those below, collected brush and dry limbs. In a moment they had a fire going. They shoved the blazing mass over onto the roof of the cabin directly below them. In an incredibly short time the shack was a blazing inferno. With the roof in flames and a murderous fire directed through the gaping window, there was but one thing to do.

"Maybe we can make the ladder!" Dunham gasped.

One of his companions surrendered. Dunham reached the ladder first and fled up it like a cat. As his head rose above the rimrock he was met by a command to surrender.

"All right, boys," he said, "you've got the drop on me": but as he reached the top he dodged to one side in an attempt to cover himself with a tree trunk and his hands sought the guns in his holsters. But Tim Conlan was too quick for him and Dunham reeled and tumbled backwards fifty feet into the valey with a bullethole in his crafty head. Another bullet thudded into the thigh of his companion before he was well started up the ladder. He relaxed his hold on the lader and crashed down into a pile of boulders.

When the posse counted their casualties several were found to be wounded but none seriously and no lives had been lost on their side. Daggett had an arm nicked. Several of the horse herd had to be shot. Three of the rustlers were dead and two gravely wounded. A messenger was despatched for the sheriff and a coroner and a physician.

"Judbury justice!" Dagett said. "Hang 'em first and try 'em afterwards! If we had only been sure of the sheriff we maybe could have got by without bloodshed. They asked for it!"

It was nearing noon when Vail, McPherson and the sherig and a deputy reached the shaft in the Santa Ritas.

"Help! Help! Help for God's sake!" Someone below shouted on hearing their voices.

"What's the matter, Holt?" Vail asked. "Can't you take it? Pretty lonesome, are you? Want some more company down there?"

"No! No! Don't let anyone else down here! Let me out of this stinkin' place!"

They lowered a rope and a chast-

ened Holt climed shudderingly out. He collapsed when he reached the top.

"Where's Hank?" Vail inquired.

"Went loco. Tried to knife me and I had to hit him with a piece of pinyon pine. Hit him too hard and he passed out. Honest to God! I didn't want to kill him! I was glad to have even the company of a crazy man down there!" Holt was telling the truth. Vail could understand it.

THE sheriff and his deputy departed with their prisoner.

"Where's Issie?" McPherson asked Wong when they reached the White Horse.

"Missise she go some nuddah place she likes go velly much allee time summah time. She say you come home maybe so me tellem you. Me think maybe so Missie heap scared you no come back. Maybe so get killed."

"All right, Wong! We catchem rustlers. Heap big fight. Rustlers no stealem no more horses. Catchem Holt, killem Toby, Truesdale and some nuddah bad man."

"Dam, Boss, you heap shootem up me no care. Heap bad hombre."

"Maybe so you fixem hi-u-muck-a-muck, Wong? Savvy? Ed, Bob, me, heap hog-a-die. Savvy?"

"Betcha life, Boss," Wong grinned. "Me fixem all light. How you likem fly chicken, oystah soup, cleam cake? Wong killem chicken last night, makem cake. Wong he allee time shuah Boss man shootem up some dam lustlah come back all light. Savvy?"

"Fine and dandy! Go to it!"

"Plitty soon leddy, Boss. Maybe so evvyboddy likem some ng ka poo? Chinamen heap likem!"

After manfully partaking of a generous portion of this favorite beverage of Wong and his brother Celestials, compared to which fiery fluid, snake venom, tarantula and scorpion juice are mild and non-irritating, they were adjured to "takem little lest." They washed and repaired to the porch to rest after the toil and burden of the day. Vail was weary but although he removed the grime from his face and hands he did not tarry.

"Mind if I take a *pasear* up to the basin and tell your daughter that Wong will have oystah soup and chicken and cleam cake leddy, plitty quick?" he asked McPherson somewhat diffidently for a bold bad detective and officer of the law.

"Mind. Not so you could notice it. I was about to suggest it. Hit the trail pronto, *son,* and don't keep the oystah soup waitin'." He winked at Daggett behind Vail's back.

Issie was sitting somewhat dejectedly with her back against her favorite tree when she heard the ring of steel-shod hooves. She ran to meet the rider.

"Bob! Bob! Thank God you've come back safe. I came near starting out myself in spite of Dad's orders. Is Dad all right—and Uncle Ed?"

"Your Dad's o.k. Ed got a scratch on one arm but it won't even lay him up."

"Oh, I'm so glad!"

Ensued a long silence broken only by certain sibilant sounds not by any means to be confounded with the pleasing murmur of the falling water or the soughing of the breeze in the aspens.

Wong hovered over Issie as solicitously as if he had been her mother and amid much spluttering and choking and gasping the health of the young couple was drunk in another round of ng ka poo.

THE END

GHOSTS ALONG THE TRAIL

ALONG the routes of the old pioneer trails to the West may still be found occasional relics of a long ago era, small ghosts from the eager, adventurous caravans which once threaded their torturous ways into the future.

Ox yokes, hub rims, spurs, knives, bells, horse shoes and the half shoes of oxen, hatchets, broken pottery, handwrought nails, and dozens of other articles strew the old trails, the California Trail, the Overland Trail, the Oregon Trail. Especially where the going was harder than usual, such as along the Platte and through the Humboldt Sink, the discards of the travellers made one vast, prolonged junk heap.

Abandoned furniture was not at all an unusual sight on the trails. Massive bureaus of carved oak, ancient, well-preserved claw-footed tables, sturdy rockers, things too much cherished by their owners to leave behind in the East, became an intolerable burden as the journey progressed, and privations increased. Many people had little idea of the difficulties and dangers they would encounter before they reached their journey's end. They loaded their wagons to the limit. But what the horses and wagons could carry easily across the rolling plains of the Middle West, became loads so great as to be dangerous to the success of the undertaking in the mountains and deserts further West. Equipment that seemed a necessity in Ohio became surplus baggage when the Platte had to be forded, and was thrown out and left to rust and blister in the sun.

In addition to articles which were voluntarily discarded, a great deal of material was lost accidentally from hands or pockets, and still more from jolted wagons. The wagons did not roll smoothly anywhere. On the flattest plains, the ground was rough from frost, clods and gopher holes. The wagons jarred and swayed and creaked every foot of the way. In the rocky, hilly terrain, they staggered and jolted along in such a way that any object not tied down bounced and tossed about in the wagons, and many things fell out unnoticed and were left behind.

Some of these discarded and lost articles were appropriated by later wagon trains, Indians helped themselves to other things, and some were eventually used by settlers, when they arrived. But all along the way a few articles have remained concealed in brush or cactus, or under wheel-turned sod, to be discovered in our own times. There are several museums in the West which have interesting collections of these relics of the trails. An observant searcher may still find souvenirs for himself, small articles which will be ghostly reminders of a great and difficult emigration.

—PETE BOGGS

WILD BILL AND THE RED LEGS

AMONG the many stories told about the famous frontiersman, Wild Bill Hickok, is this tale of one of his early exploits in marksmanship:

Young Hickok went to Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1855, and there decided he would like to join the Red Leg Rangers. This was an unofficial troop of guerrilla cavalry organized to resist raiding bands which might come into abolitionist Kansas from pro-slavery Missouri. It consisted of about three hundred men, under General Jim Lane.

The men were required to furnish complete equipment for themselves, as to both arms and mounts. Hickok did not have the money to buy a horse and outfit for himself, and was, accordingly, refused admission to the Red Legs.

Nevertheless, he hung around, observing and admiring the activities of the Rangers. They were all out in a meadow one day, competing for prizes in marksmanship with pistols and rifles. Hickok watched, attracting attention to himself by laughing raucously whenever anyone failed to hit the bull's eye. Annoyed, one of the Red Legs turned to the youth and told him he could enter the contests and compete for the prizes. On the condition that if he didn't take a prize he would receive a beating with a rifle butt.

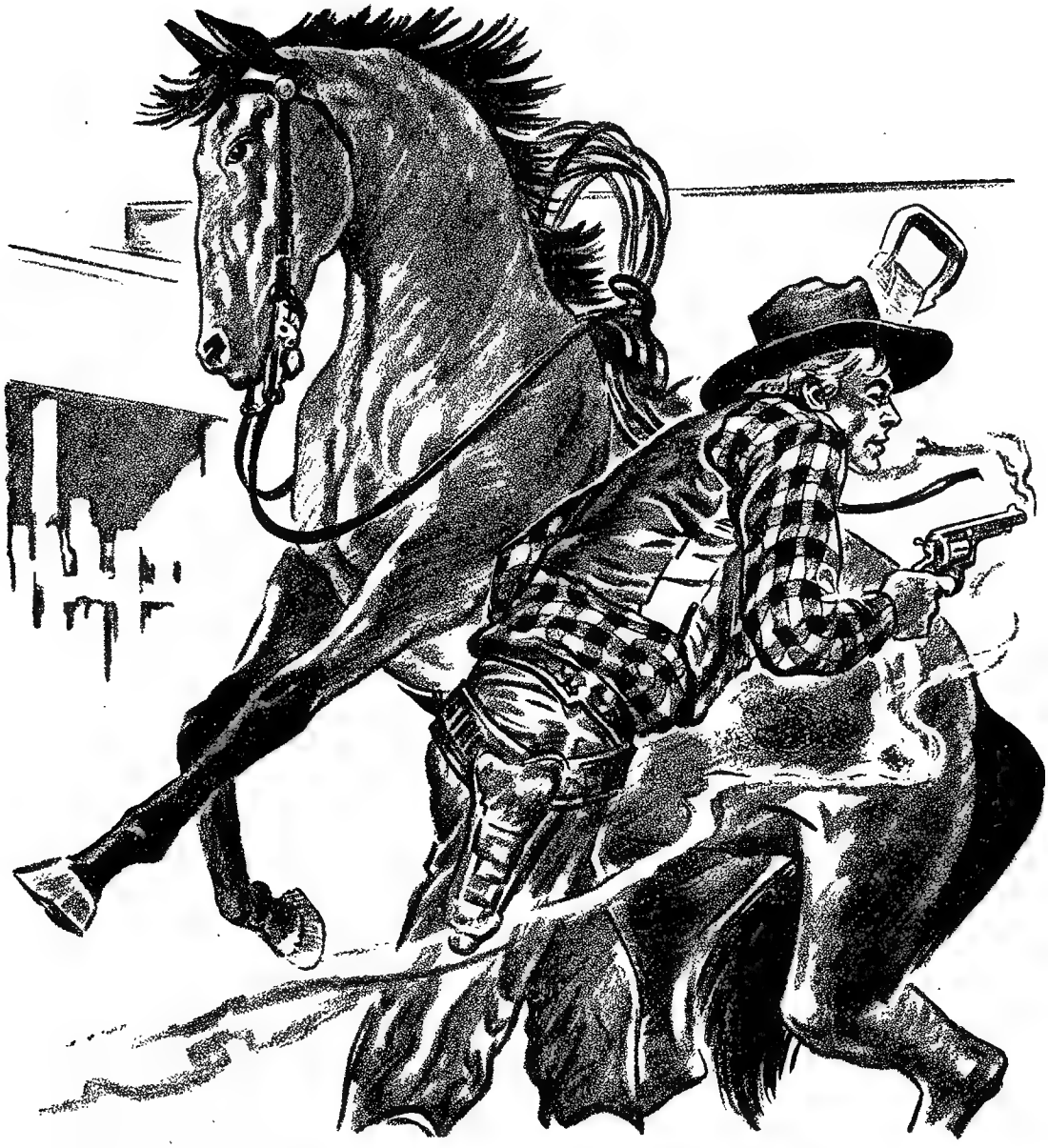
All eyes turned to the handsome young man as he quietly consented to compete on these terms. The three hundred Red Leg Rangers had shot for the first prize, a horse, saddle and bridle. Hickok quickly took his stand, raised his rifle and fired. The General himself started the cheering at the best shot of the day. A second and a third shot found dead center, and the boy had won for himself one of the requirements toward becoming a Red Leg.

The next contest was for a prize of a rifle and belt, two revolvers and a bowie-knife. The shooting was done with pistols at twenty paces, the best two of three shots. Again Bill Hickok scored three dead-center bull's eyes, and won the arms.

The men by now were all deeply interested in this remarkable exhibition of skill, and they watched intently as the young man came to his third trial. A round piece of wood was to be rolled along the ground and the contestants, using rifles at a hundred yards, were to hit this in motion. The prize was a purse of one hundred dollars, and should he win this also, Wild Bill Hickok would be in the Red Leg Rangers for certain.

The wheel was started in motion. At the same instant, a crow flew over the heads of the crowd of men. Hickok raised his rifle, fired at the crow, and brought it down. Then seizing another weapon from a nearby Ranger, he leveled it and sent a bullet through the still rolling wheel.

—HILARY COWEN



THE man and his horse were covered with a dust so greyish-white they looked as though they'd ridden through a tunnel of alkali which had fallen upon them. The horse plodded along, hammer-head bent low, moving slowly down the very center of the street, which was little more than a couple of wagon-wheel ruts. The man sat slumped in the saddle and swayed with each movement of the horse's quarters like a reed in the wind, and with the same effect of falling at any instant. A cartridge belt slung around the man's middle and hanging from it were a pair of holstered guns, so dust-covered it was impossible to make out either the make or caliber.

Jess Gaines was the first to spot

NEST OF THIEVES

by J. J. Allerton

A number of things seemed to happen at the same time. There was a blast of sound from the sixgun, and there was a snapping sound as the gunbelt parted at the man's waist. . . .

When a stranger rides into a town he can expect to have suspicious eyes follow him—especially a town like Hardtack where a thief is safer than a law abiding citizen . . .

the stranger. That was reasonable because Jess operated the blacksmith shop in Hardtack and his shop was the first building one encountered coming in from the alkali flats which lay between Bitter Creek, twenty miles east, and Hardtack. Jess had heard the pad-pad of the horse from a long ways off; Jess had the reputation of knowing the gait and sound of every horse in a vicinity of fifty miles.

Jess hung the shoe for "Sneezy" Cutts' horse's right hoof on the anvil horn, and wiping his hands on the leather apron around his stout middle, he stepped to the shelter of the overhang above the blacksmith shop and peered through narrowed eyes into the sun haze toward the man and his horse.

The horseman passed by without so much as vouchsafing a glance toward the man watching smith. But though the other seemed not to notice Jess, Jess saw many things. Not so much about the man but about the horse. When it came to horses, there was little that escaped Jess Gaines. There were a couple of peculiar things about that horse . . . .

AT THE very instant the stranger was riding into town, the Reverend Sylvester Boggs, the Widder Brown, Jake Hoggins, Hardtack's only grocer, and Silas Migwump who owned the general store bearing his name, were assembled in the Widder's cottage. Two pitchers of the widder's famous cherry-lemon punch stood on the sideboard and in each of the men's fists, was clutched one of the widder's best milk-china, filled to the brim with the cherry-lemon drink.

The Reverend Boggs had the floor. As was usual, in any meeting of people discussing the morals of Hardtack, Boggs was always the first to present his views:

" . . . There is no question of it, brothers, and sister," he reiterated a point he had brought out from the first, his rather thin voice doing its best to sound pontifical. "Hardtack has had a very bad name for itself . . ." he nodded in satisfaction as the various heads bobbed in confirmation of his words. ". . . And, no doubt, justifiably. But with the coming of, shall we say, civilization, things changed. At least for a time. Then Sam Wilde and "Sneezy" Cutts and their villianous crew got control again, and things turned for the worse again. I called this meeting to plan how we can change them again . . . ."

The Widder Brown fairly beamed her pride at the Reverend. Such fancy words . . . and such a lovely man . . . too thin perhaps, but she knew she had the answer for that. Three squares a day of her fine cooking and he'd put on weight, all right. Need it be said that the Widder Brown had had her sights set on the Reverend for a long time? Hoggins too shook his head several times in silent agreement. As always, in such cases, there proved to be one dissenter. Here, it was the hard-headed, stubborn, Migwump.

He had usurped the rocking chair on his entrance and was now rocking rather recklessly back and forth, and with each movement of the rocker, his head would shake in negative motion. Sounds kept dribbling from between his hard-pressed lips:

"Uh, uh! Nope . . . Uh, uh! Nope! Plumb foolishness, all this. Cain't settle things this way. Won't work . . ."

"Don't you ever agree with any-

thing?" the widder asked in petulant tones.

"Yep! Some things!" came the quick reply. "But when a man comes in an wants a dozen separators, or three miles of fencin' wire, I allus want to know the whys and whats'ss 'fore I let the stuff go. Cain't give credit where credit ain't due. Same's this.

"Same things bother'n me as is the Reverend. But I don't go off half-cocked. I say Hardtack is a nice town an' there's nice people here. But the town's run by a couple of bad characters who happen to have a couple o' things on their side, we ain't got. Puttin' things in their proper order, Sam and Sneezy got the heavy artillery. Words don't stack up against guns!"

"'The pen is mightier than the sword,'" Reverend Boggs intoned in a sepulchural voice.

"Amen!" Widder Brown shouted.

"Could be," Migwump objected, "when it comes to books. But this is Hardtack an' we got to face facts. The gunmen what rule this town use .44's an' I for one ain't goin' to try to outshoot a .44 with a Parker pen, even if it shot ink for fifty feet . . ."

TWO other men were facing the facts at that instant, in what proved to be the most unusual case of coincidence in the history of Hardtack. Sam Wilde and Sneezy Cutts at that very moment were planning to change history in Hardtack, but not in the same way the ones at the Widder Brown's house were planning. Sam Wilde, a thickset man in his early forties, was doing the talking:

". . . Trouble is," he suddenly switched from an unimportant matter of something they were discussing, "there's too many **nice** people in this twon. We gotta get rid of them, hear me, Sneezy!"

Sneezy Cutts looked at his partner and wondered why he had set up shop with this man. Certainly Wilde's weaknesses were such that the matter of his strength was strictly problematical. Wilde was loud, vicious, mean, and completely untrustworthy. But Wilde held many cards Sneezy didn't, principally, a half dozen gun men who would fight the devil at Wilde's command.

Sneezy operated on the theory that a man had to outthink his opponent as well as outfight him. Snezy felt a spasm coming on and suddenly whipped an outsize square of crimson cotton from a back pocket and blew a trumpet blast from his huge flaming nose, let forth a tremendous sneeze, blew his nose again and replaced the kerchief.

"AAh!" he sighed in pleasure. "Well now, Sam. Might be yore right. And **might** be you ain't. Half dozen of one an' a like amount of the other. Gotta admit though, these **nice** folk serves our purpose pretty well. Trouble with you, Sam, you hate to talk. You ain't built for it and when a man like Sylvester Boggs starts shootin' off his trap, you see red and want to run him outta town at the end of a .44.

"Yore wrong there. Guys like Boggs is jest hongry. An' if you leave him to the Widder Brown, why she'll feed him and fondle him an' pretty soon tie him to her apron strings an' that'll be that. Nope, Sam. The guy's I worry about are men like Migwump!

"I allus have found a man in business'll fight like ten devils the minute he thinks his business is going to be

took from him, 'specially when he's got the most of it in town. Migwump has plenty money, enough to make things hot for us if an' when he wants to. Right now he's playing ball with Boggs an' them. Give him a chance, a chance, I mean to make a dollar out of it, an' he'll change his tune . . ."

"You mean more talk?" Wilde asked sourly.

"I'll do the talkin'," Sneezy said shortly. "All's for you to do is act tough at the right time."

"I don't act tough!" Wilde boasted. "I am tough!"

"Well, this ain't the time for it, Sam. I'll tell you when the time for that is . . ."

"YOU'LL tell me!" Wilde bellowed, half-rising from his chair opposite Cutts.

"AAH, sit down, an' don't act like they want us to!" Sneezy grunted. "What're you so surprised at? Ain't I allus told you? Now you just listen to me an' we'll fix their clock . . ."

THERE was a choice of many saloons in Hardtack. All a man had to do was walk down the center of the main street, close his eyes, turn in a circle and point with his hand after completing the circle. It was impossible to miss. Wherever the hand pointed, it would be to a saloon. However there were times when those saloons were more or less empty. Early afternoon of any day except Saturday, found most of them in the doldrums of business. So it was that there weren't many who observed the stranger on the alkali coated horse, ride into town.

There weren't many, but it was unfortunate that the ones who did were not the choice of the Hardtack's population. And as it happened Riley Gates and his crew stepped out of the bat-wing doors of Sam Wilde's Crystal Bar just as the horse and his rider swung past.

Gates was full of red-eye, the .44's slamming against his thighs were heavy, Gates' boys had had several hard days work done, and Riley was hell-bent for having some fun. The dust-coated pair passing seemed to offer an excellent chance for it. Riley's left hand streaked for his gun and it came up in a flashing, sun-streaked arc, spitting fire as it did. Dust and bits of rock flew from almost under the horse's nose and it leaped to one side, almost jolting the rider from his saddle.

Ringing, boisterous laughter echoed the sound of the shot and what followed. Dust flew from the horse's coat as another shot snipped hair from his fetlock when Riley threw another shell at it, this time in deliberate aim to see how close he could come. The dust flew when the horse went straight up in the air.

The man on his back didn't stay there long. In a movement so lithe, it was like a cat striking, he slipped from his back and alighted straddle-legged, slightly bent at the knees, and both hands poised and hooked just above the gun butts just below his hips. The sound of laughter died then. And five men standing close to the hitch rail in front of the Crystal Bar turned as though to stone at the movement. For here was the way of a gunman, here was a man ready for a kill.

Riley Gates was a tough one. Sam Wilde hired men who weren't afraid of guns, men or devils. They were killers one and all. And they were brought up in a school that taught fair play only brought a plot on boot

hill. A wry grin twisted the mouth of Riley as he sheathed his gun and stepped forward toward the stranger.

"What the hell was the idea?" the man asked.

Riley kept moving forward. He knew what his boys were doing as he stepped forward. They were forming a half-moon of waiting guns behind him. He also knew that the stranger was as aware of that as he. Riley stopped some five feet from the other. The grin was still on his lips.

"I asked what the hell was the idea of that?" the stranger said quietly. It was like the quiet before a storm.

"Just havin' fun," Riley said in tones as low as the other's. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No," the other said. "I don't mind. Not when it's just you and me. Course if the other boys are gonna play I might as well be on my way . . . ."

"Why not stick around?" Riley suggested. "My boys and me like fun. An' you look like the kind of a guy what can give it . . ."

There were six of them. Yet not a single one could have sworn that he saw the guns come out of their leather sheaths, so swift were the hands that impelled those steel carriers of death. Two shots rang out and Riley Gates staggered backwards, his hands clawing futilly for guns which were no longer hanging in their accustomed place at his hips. Those two shots had ripped the belt from his waist and Riley's hands found but empty air on which to hang themselves.

"Keep pat!" the stranger said, his voice seeming barely above a whisper yet carrying a sound of doom in it. "First man moves, I'll aim different . . ."

Not a man moved. Five statues watched through stony eyes, as the stranger stepped forward closing the gap between him and Riley until inches separated them. Gates could only curse and watch the other approach.

"Okay, damn you!" Riley bit out. "You got me. Go ahead. Those yellow-bellies ain't got no guts . . ."

THE grey-green eyes probing into Riley Gates' were coldly indifferent to the words. There was something so icy about their peculiarly blank stare a shiver of fear racked the squat shape of the man facing the stranger. For the first time in his life Riley Gates was afraid of what a man was going to do. What the man did was not the expected. The hands went down and sheathed the guns and a smile twisted away from the narrow lips, tight-drawn in anger.

"I've had my fun," the man said. "Now I'd like a drink. Where can a man get whiskey that won't burn his guts out, in this town?"

"Why not step in here?" a voice suggested.

The stranger's eyes were the only things that moved in his face. They turned to where the voice had come and saw a tall, spare man in faded levi's and dark shirt, open at the collar. The man was standing facing him from just beyond the still-swinging doors of the saloon. He had one hand hooked in the wide belt which was bare of guns. A flat-brimmed, low-crowned hat swung idly back and forth from the other hand. A pair of pale eyes regarded the stranger with abstract look from under bushy brows set in a straight line

across a narrow face. The stranger noticed that everything about the man was narrow, slender, everything but the man's nose. That was altogether out of proportion to the rest of the face, for it was immense . . .

"Why not?" the stranger asked, shrugging his shoulders slightly. He turned and whistled in an off-key and at the sound the man's horse trotted forward.

The man tied him to the hitch-rail and stepped past the other in the shadow of the doorway. Sneezy Cutts followed the stranger into the cool confines of the Crystal Bar. Riley Gates and his crew also decided to have something to drink at a quick signal from Sneezy. A silent whistle of wonder came from Riley's lips when he stooped to retrieve his belt. It had been neatly shot away in two places. A fraction of an inch to one side and Riley would have been hit in the hips.

The stranger's quick eyes took in the character of the place in one glance. They saw the long straight bar, the gaming tables along the two walls and the watcher's stand in the center of the room, like a pulpit of sin, dominating the room. It was too early for play at the tables, though two of them had men sitting at poker. Only two of the crew of four bartenders were on duty. The stranger, with Sneezy following close behind stepped up to the bar.

"Have a drink on me," Sneezy said.

The stranger eyed the other carefully.

"Mind?" Sneezy asked.

"Why should I? Yore money's good . . . Rye, and some beer for a chase," to the bartender who came up. Then, turning back to Sneezy the stranger said, "Thanks! Have one with me . . ."

"I don't drink," Sneezy said. "Thank you. It makes me sneeze. That's why they call me Sneezy. What do they call you?"

"Jenkins. Bud Jenkins."

"Welcome to Hardtack, Jenkins. It's a nice town. The kind of town where a man's business is his own an' he can spend his money any way he wants . . ."

"An' how does it feel about the way a man makes his money?" Jenkins asked in a slow drawl.

"Doesn't care, so long as he spends it," Sneezy replied. "Gonna be here long?"

"For a town what don't ask questions, it sure doesn't live up to its name," Jenkins replied.

But Sneezy only grinned at that. Jenkins noticed, however, that the grin extended only to the other's eyes.

"Got me that time, eh?" Sneezy said. "But that's me, allus curious. You got fast gun hands, mister. Maybe you could use some work?"

"Depends . . ."

"Sure. Yore right, too. I allus did like a man what's particular. I know just where we stand then. It'll pay pretty good . . . Hundred-a-week . . ."

THE grey-green eyes widened momentarily, then narrowed to their former watchful air. But Sneezy knew the shot had told. Hundred-dollar-a-week jobs were rarer than rainfall on the flats east of town. Sneezy had a good reason for the offer. Had Jenkins faltered, or backed away from Riley's challenge, or acted in any way other than he had, Sneezy would have passed him by. But by his very actions Jenkins

stamped himself as the man Sneezy wanted.

"That's right good pay, mister," Jenkins said. "Even for guns . . . Mighty hard to refuse. But maybe I'm wanted for something? Maybe . . .?" he let the rest trail unspoken.

"Mister," Sneezy said in a low voice carefully modulated, "you just rode in off them flats. From the looks of yore hoss and yoreself I'd say you'd been ridin' a long time. There's twenty miles of that stuff. Takes a man who's not particular about some things to risk that. But here you ain't in Puma County an' the law's different. Come to think on it there ain't no law here. An' that's why I'd like for you to say yes to that hundred-a-week. We need some law here . . ."

"Meanin'?"

"Like to be Sheriff here?" Sneezy asked.

Jenkins turned abruptly to the bar, downed the last of the beer and said over his shoulder:

"Right now I'd like to take a bath and wash my hoss down. Then I could line my guts with a steak or two. After that, who knows? I might come lookin' for you. This place yores?"

"My partner's," Sneezy said. "My place is down the end of this street. Can't miss it. Called Beggar's Roost. Be seein' you. I'm in from seven on . . ."

"Could be. Now where can a man find a place to stay in this burg?"

"Try the Widder Brown's. She serves good food and furnishes water. All she asks is for trouble to find another house. Come on out an I'll show you her place . . ."

BUD Jenkins walked up the graveled walk and sniffed deeply of the flower odor which was on all sides. The Widder Brown liked flowers, it appeared. A rather odd smile lifted the corner of his mouth as he neared the wide porch with its two rockers standing guard by the sides of the door. Just as he reached the stoop the door opened and three men made their appearance. The three heard the sound of his footsteps and turned as one to see who it was.

Jenkins tied a running loop to one of the posts supporting the porch, slapped his horse lightly on the nose and mounted the three steps.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Jenkins said as he reached them. "But is this the home of the Widow Brown?"

Two of them looked askance at his dust-filled clothes, and dust-lined face. But the third, a peppery man in his early sixties, if Jenkins judged rightly, turned sparkling blue eyes on him and said:

"Right, son. This is the Widder Brown's. Might I ask what you might be wantin'?"

"Now isn't that odd," Jenkins replied with a straight face, though there was a twinkle in his eyes. "I was told that this is one town that minds its own affairs. Yet in the last half hour I've been asked everything but whether or not I have a birthmark. Well, if a question is the password, I might as well 'fess up.

"I've come to ask the widow if she can put me up . ."

"Then let me give you a bit of advice, young feller," the peppery old man said. "Put away that hardware. The widder don't like for none of her boarders to tote shootin' irons about . . ."

"Gentlemen!" Jenkins broke in suddenly. "If I may ask a question? Am I correct in assuming that I am

addressing what could be called the moral element of Hardtack?"

The three sent each other questioning glances. But only Jenkins had the answer so they turned to him as one and merely nodded. Jenkins' smile broadened and after a second, he said:

"Then would you mind stepping inside? There are some things I'd like to discuss with you."

Once again they found chairs in the parlor. And for once, at their entrance with Jenkins in their midst wearing his guns, the Widow Brown had only looked her surprise, and without talk, found a chair for the stranger. Nor had they long to wait.

"It seems to me, folks, that I'm to be your next sheriff," Jenkins began. He beamed at their horrified and startled looks, and continued, "That is right. At least according to someone named Sneezy Cutts. He has offered the job to me and I'm going to accept . . ."

"Another thief in a nest of thieves!" Reverend Boggs broke in bitterly.

"It must be a feathery nest then," Jenkins said. "Cutts offered me a hundred dollars a week."

He waited until the excitement his words brought on died down before resuming:

"Now me, I'm a curious man. What in the name of all that's holy could be worth that much money to Cutts, in a town of this size? There seems to be two principal occupations, drinking and gambling. Cutts and his partner control both. Altogether, there couldn't be more than three hundred and maybe fifty people in the whole of Hardtack. So what does he stand to gain by it?"

"Hardtack doesn't mean anything," the peppery one said. He was rocking furiously in the rocker to which he'd instantly made a beeline. "It's just like me. I'm Migwump; own the general store. I don't depend on the townfolk for my business. Starve to death if I did. I get it off the ranchers and miners hereabouts. So does Cutts, and that bulldozing partner of his, Sam Wilde. An' I think I know the reason why Sneezy wants you. For one thing, Sam Wilde's gettin' too ornery lately. An' too big. He's got a lot of gunmen on his payroll. An' I think Sneezy wants to beat Sam to the draw an' elect his own boy sheriff."

"And that, gentlemen," Jenkins said as he rose, "makes an interesting problem. Thanks for the information. And one thing more. Can I depend on you, sir, and you," he nodded toward Hoggins, "for help, should Cutts want me to be sheriff?"

"In what way?" Hoggins spoke for the first time. He had a deep voice which usually startled people and as a consequence, rarely spoke.

"I'll need deputies. I might call on both of you, and any friends you might have."

"You can call on us," Hoggins assured him.

THE Beggars Roost was full to the rafters when Jenkins made his appearance a little after seven that night. There were more tables for gambling than there were at Wilde's place. Jenkins spotted Cutts immediately. Cutts was talking to a thick-shouldered bearded man, who seeing Jenkins approach moved off. Cutts turned a smiling face toward Jenkins.

"Guess you took yore bath and filled yore belly from the looks of ye," he said. "Even shined yore

hardware. Kinda small caliber, ain't they?"

".38's," Jenkins replied. "They do the work as well as the bigger ones do. Well, I won't talk around. Comin' right to the point, what's the pitch?"

"Fine! Fine," Cutts said as he took Jenkins' elbow and steered him away from the bar toward a door at one end of the room. "My office," he said as they reached the door.

The room was empty. In one corner stood an old-fashioned roll-top desk, closed. There was a daybed along one wall and cabinet along another held mysterious things behind faded chintz curtains. Cutts motioned Jenkins to one of the chairs, as he dropped into the opposite.

"Okay, then," he began. "We can get right down to business. My partner and I figgered it's time for Hardtack to have a sheriff. 'Course we don't plan on a regular election if you understand what I mean . . . ?"

Jenkins nodded. He was way ahead of the other.

" . . . It'll be fixed. Anyways, I was thinkin' it over an' you know what I discovered. Sam Wilde's been playin' tricks on me. He's got almost all the artillery in town on his side. An' Sam's an almighty ambitious man. So I figgered I'd get the law on my side. There's one thing Sam don't know that I do. See that feller I was talkin' to, Jess Gaines?"

Jenkins looked blank at the name.

"Jess's our blacksmith. Mighty fine man with a hoss. What's more he gets around because old man Migwump don't handle the stuff Jess uses so he has to go all the way to Barstack, fifty mile away for his gear.

"He was there day afore last an' guess what he heard? Hardtack's no longer in Haddon County. The durn legislatur put us in Puma County. Now Puma County has mighty strict laws on gambling. An' since you'd be the sheriff here you could call on the other law forces of the county. Sam Wilde wouldn't stand a chance . . . Get it now, Jenkins?"

"I get it," the other said.

"Good!" Cutts said. "Now for the next couple of days I want you to get acquainted with the boys an' I'll do my share to promote good-will. Then we'll call the election. It'll be as easy as fallin' off a log."

Which was exactly the case.

The very afternoon Jenkins won the election they were all assembled in Cutts' back office. Drinks flowed freely and Riley Gates and others of Wilde's gunmen shook hands with Jenkins and slapped him on the back with brotherly affection. It broke up by Cutts telling them he had some work to do.

"See you at my place tonight," Wilde said in parting. "Might as well get things right . . ."

" . . . See you for a second?" Cutts asked as Jenkins was about to leave.

Sneezy kept one eye on the door and as the last, but Jenkins, went through, said, "Stop in before going over to Sam's, understand?"

JENKINS nodded his head in understanding and followed the others out. But he continued past the rest, assembled at the bar. He even refused Sam Wilde's offer of a drink, so great was his haste. There were five men waiting for him at the Widow Brown's . . .

Hoggins and Migwump had found three others who were not afraid of Cutts and Wilde. These men too were in business. They awaited Jenkins' arrival with a mixture of elation and

fear. Nor were their fears allayed when he stepped into the parlor where they and the Reverend Boggs and the widder had assembled.

Jenkins got right down to brass tacks. His first question was a surprising one:

"I've been on the prowl the last few days and found out a lot of things. There's a link missing to the puzzle I'm working on. Do any of you know whether Jess Gaines has a telephone or not?"

Migwump knew.

"Yes he has. I know because I stopped letting him use mine. I wouldn't let that deadbeat use anything. Anyways, he got one installed a month or so back . . ."

"That's what I wanted to know. I've tried to pry into that back room of his but he'd never let me," Jenkins said. "Now the parts fit all right. Okay, men, raise your right hands . . . ."

And Jenkins acquired five deputies in the time it took to swear them in. They felt a little strange as he shook their hands one by one, but his ready grin and suddenly smiling eyes, eyes which they'd only known to be bleak before, set them feeling more natural.

"All right, men," Jenkins said after they'd seated themselves again. "We're going to work fast and we're going to do it tonight. Because I think Sneezy has plans for tonight. So we might as well get our work over and done with.

"Now I'll tell you why I think it's going to be tonight. Sneezy asked me to come and see him, privately, before I go to Wilde's place where there's supposed to be a celebration. Migwump, you and Hoggins have been mines of information because of your business. People just love to gossip and a grocer and general-store keeper hear every bit of news. So when you told me about the big cattle raids in the past week I put a couple of facts together and arrived at this conclusion.

"Riley Gates and his crew just got back into town this morning. They act like men who've been on the range for a week or so, without whiskey or other entertainment. Tonight Wilde and Sneezy were all wound up like toys. Now Wilde has that big place of his down at Gallup's Draw. I figure he's got the cattle at his place because it's guarded like a prison camp.

"So if things work out the way I think they will, Sneezy's going to suggest that as my first official act, I'm going to raid Wilde's. Therefore, as my deputies, I'll want you boys to meet me there. Be at the road fork just before the draw, where that big oak stands. . . ."

There was no need for more talk. They knew what their duties were.

SNEEZY Cutts for once was not smiling. Something about the man told Jenkins he had been pacing the office, waiting for the new Sheriff's arrival. Cutts sighed in relief as Jenkins closed the door behind him.

"Glad to see you and I'm not going to keep you long. Wilde might get to wondering. Without wastin' time, here's the set-up. Wilde has three thousand head of rustled cattle over at his place. You get some deputies and make the raid tonight. That's all."

"Just like that, eh?" Jenkins asked. "And what'll Riley Gates and his men be doing while I'm making the raid?"

"They'll be blind drunk," Sneezy said. "I've got three men you can

deputize. We'll give them sawed-off shotguns for usin' against the three men Wilde has left up at his place. They'll be angels, I promise you."

After a few more instructions Jenkins left for Wilde's. What Sneezy promised about Riley's men proved right. They were quite drunk by the time Jenkins slipped out and made rendezvous with the three men Sneezy had given him. What he told them, however, was not what they expected.

"You men go back to the Crystal Bar and wait for my return. See to it that no one leaves the place and that includes Sam Wilde himself. Understand?"

They didn't but Sneezy had told them to follow orders.

Migwump and the rest were waiting Jenkins at the oak tree. The raid on Wilde's proved simpler than they had thought. The man who had been left to guard the ranch were in the ranch house. They had managed to find whiskey and not a single one was sober enough to offer resistance. Jenkins left two of the five deputies on guard while he rode back to town with the others. Hoggins and Migwump, being the oldest of the five, had been left at Wilde's.

"One last thing, men," Jenkins reined his horse up close to the others as they entered Hardtack. "I'm not just the Sheriff of this town, I'm also the Sheriff of all of Puma County, legally. So don't be afraid to blast, if you have to. The law is on our side."

The three he had left to guard Wilde's saloon were still there, bewildered but waiting. They were even more bewildered at Jenkins' return with three other deputies. Jenkins didn't allow them to think.

"Sneezy still in there?" he asked.

"No," one of them replied. "He and Jess Gaines rode off down to his place a while back."

"Fine!" the sheriff replied. "These men are deputies. You're all going in there and line up the whole crew that's in there. You all know who are Sam Wilde's crew. Take their hardware and keep them lined up until I get back. There's a couple of trucks comin' in from Barstack with ten of my deputies riding them. When that truck gets here we'll load the whole shebang into them and take a ride to Barstack. See you later . . ."

SNEEZY and Jess were sitting over a bottle as Jenkins swung the door inward. They looked up in startled surprise at his entrance.

"Evening, gentlemen," Jenkins said as he leaned against the door jamb.

"Say!" Gaines said suspiciously. "Yore back kinda early."

"That's right. Doesn't take me long to get my work done."

"You mean they're all rounded up?" Sneezy asked.

"More questions, eh," Jenkins said. "Y'know, I think I'll ask some. When did you suspect I didn't come in off the flats, Jess? When you saw the inside of my horse's whithers? I guess that's right. You didn't think I saw you. But when I washed old Baldy down I saw we forgot to powder him there. And any man that knows horses would know Baldy hadn't been riding twenty miles of alkali flats and not get his inside flanks dusty.

"So you called Barstack and asked for me and I wasn't there, and naturally you put two and two together. That's when you called Sneezy and right away he got this wonderful

idea. Only it isn't quite working out like you thought it would. You see, I'm arresting you and Sneezy here . . . ."

Gaines made a mistake then. He went for the gun at his hip. Lightning and thunder struck then. Jenkins shot the gun away from Gaines and as the blacksmith leaped for him, knocked the man to the floor with a single swipe of the barrel of one of the .38's. Sneezy got to his feet, visibly shaken.

"Now don't get excited," he begged Jenkins. "Put up that hardware. I'm going along peaceful . . ."

Jenkins holstered his guns but stood tense and watchful as the other stepped forward, hands high, toward the door. Suddenly Sneezy's face contorted and his left hand went backward toward his hip pocket. The hand was almost out before Jenkins went for his guns. There were two shots which rang out simultaneously. And Sneezy, his face wearing a look of startled surprise, slumped to the floor, his chest crimsoning in a fountain of blood. Jenkins' left hand fell limply, and blood began a slow drip to the floor.

"He'd of got me," Jenkins said to himself as he started for his horse, "if he'd of practiced that left-handed draw more. Because I thought he was going for his handkerchief again . . ."

(The End)

WINGED SCOURGE

FOR a five year period, in the 1870's, pioneer farmers on the Dakota prairies suffered an invasion of locusts which devastated all hopes for crops. The greedy insects devoured every green shoot which dared appear above the ground. The crawling horror of that visitation was an obstacle which was surmounted only by the utmost in courage and hardihood, by pioneer men and women determined to make their homes there at any cost.

The tribes of Sioux Indians, which had once owned the prairies, and had given them to the white men through treaties, had for some time been very uneasy at the way the white men's plows had gashed into the earth, and the way the divine gifts of grass and buffalo had been tampered with. The farmers considered that the Indians had wasted good soil by keeping it as a hunting preserve; but the Indians feared retribution from their Gods upon themselves for having agreed to the treaties which allowed this sacrilege to take place, and upon the white men, who had so wickedly destroyed the life-giving grass put upon the Earth by the Great Father, Wakan Tanka. A great curse must inevitably fall upon these sacrilegious people, said the troubled Indians. The white men, if they considered these views at all, dismissed them as heathen superstí-

tion, and went about their work of establishing farms upon the prairie, digging up squares of the sod for their homes, plowing into it for their fields.

Then in June, of 1873, it began, the curse predicted by the Sioux. The Rocky Mountain locust, or raider grasshopper, appeared upon the prairie lands in numbers like the sands of the ocean. Like a great grey raincloud they drifted out of the west across the summer sky, then settled gently upon the earth in trembling vibration, and began to eat.

Stunned and horrified, the farmers stared at the crawling earth. Beating at the mass of shining green bodies killed hundreds at each blow, but the crushed bodies of the hundreds were instantly covered with the living bodies of thousands, and tens of thousands. Desperately, an attempt was made to burn the prairies, in order to destroy the insects with the grass. But the previous winter had seen the deepest snows in years, and that spring had experienced heavy late spring rains. The prairie was too wet to burn. The locusts swarmed on, chewing, chewing, sawing away at every bit of living green. For two weeks their devastation continued. Then one morning the whole mass took to their wings in unison and soared away to the northeast. They were gone, and late crops could still be planted and matured, but the insects had left their eggs in every inch of prairie sod, and the farmers dreaded the next springtime.

Sure enough, the next spring, and the next, and the next, the devouring locusts hatched out in millions. Each year, 1874, 1875, and 1876, men's faces became grimmer, more desolate, as they prayed for surcease from this pestilence. The scourge lasted for just two weeks each Junetime, but the period was horrible beyond words. The grasshoppers were everyplace, in the wells, the buildings, the food supplies, clothing, everywhere.

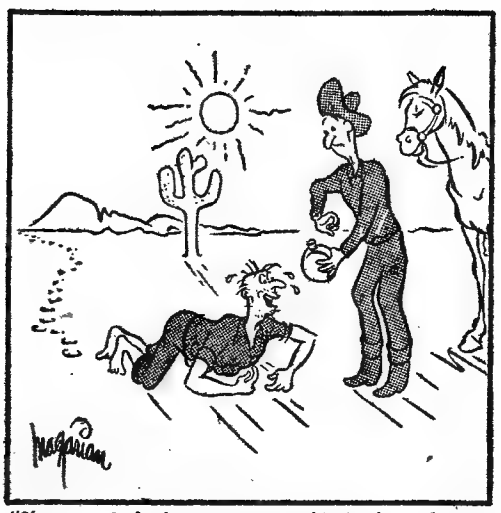
In an attempt to save their valuable vegetable gardens, the men dug trenches around the garden plots, and burned hay there night and day. The locusts, in their onward march, swarmed into these trenches and were burned, until at last their green bodies choked out the fire by sheer numbers, and the precious gardens were lost to the living hosts. After exactly fourteen days, some instinct lifted the whole mass into the air, and they flew in a vast cloud into the east, leaving behind them desolation, devastation, and desperation, as the frantic farmers hastened to plant new crops in order that they might get through another winter.

The fifth and final year of the great plague, 1877, was the worst of all. To the millions of insects which hatched from the Dakota soil, were added a vast swarm which flew in from the west. Through North and South Dakota and Minnesota they crawled, eating every verdant thing. In many places they were so thick that they were in layers, piling up so high that horses slipped on them and could not be driven through the mess. Railroad tracks were so covered that trains could not get through. Neither eggs nor chickens could be eaten, so infested were they with the strong flavor of the countless insects eaten by the fowl.

Some communities paid a bounty for the locusts of a dollar a bushel, and fifty cents a gallon for eggs. Frequent religious services were held in every one of the scattered settlements of the afflicted region, and many were the prayers sent up seeking deliverance from the scourge.

Finally, after fourteen days of unprecedented destruction, the insects rose with one accord, as in previous years, and flew to the northeast. Then, strangely, when over Lake Superior, they settled down upon the lake, and the entire vast migration was destroyed. Drowned bodies by the millions floated upon the waters of the lake, or came to rest along the rocky shores for dozens of miles.

—JUNE LURIE



"Shux no—I don't want water—this is the only way I can carry these gold nuggets inside my shirt!"

The Lady and the Lynch-Mob

GRACE Bailey sat in her neat living room, waiting for them to come and tell her. From the window, she had seen first the dust cloud, then the group of horsemen, moving toward town from the east, from the bad-lands. She had *known* even then.

Now she sat waiting, a plump, smooth-faced little woman of perhaps fifty-five, with hands folded tightly in her lap. She sat visualizing their approach. They were at the gate now, milling, dismounting. Their boots sounded heavily in the small front yard. Now they were in conference. Who would come inside and break the news? Henry Trask, probably, Grace thought. They all looked to Henry. He was the born leader. He always stepped forward when something was to be done. He owned the Split Diamond, largest spread south of the river. The others looked up to him.

She visualized Henry Trask breaking from the group, moving toward the front door. He would take off a leather glove and raise a big hand.

The knock was light and hesitant.

"Come in," Grace Bailey's hand tightened in her lap.

Henry Trask opened the door. He took off his white Stetson and came inside and towered, ill at ease, over the small, blue-eyed woman. He stared at a spot in front of her feet until Grace felt a sudden sympathy for the big man.

"He's dead, isn't he, Hank?" she asked softly.

Henry Trask colored and brought his eyes up to meet hers. "You already know? I figured we'd get here first—and break it gentle-like."

"You *are* the first. And thank you for your consideration, Hank, but you don't have to spare me. I've been a sheriff's wife too long to weep and carry on when death finally comes."

Trask twisted the leather glove between big fingers. "Yes, ma'am. We found him over east, 'bout five miles down the Santos Trail. He'd been shot three times—in the back, ma'am. We went lookin' after his horse was picked up headin' back to town."

Trask's uneasiness returned. He had evidently expected tears. Natural protestations of grief seemed the order of things. But they didn't come. Grace Bailey said:

"Thank you, Hank. They'll be bringing him in?"

He nodded. "A few of us came on ahead to break the news."

Grace heard him only vaguely through the screaming silence in her mind. This, at last, was reality, she told herself. Yet she had lived it over and over, back through the years—this moment of finality. The long nights of waiting for Frank to return; the endless times she had known he was dead, had experienced all the thudding realizations of his death, only to have him return unharmed, time after time.

Trask was speaking and Grace tried to concentrate upon his words;

"....good news with the bad, ma'am. We got the killer. They're bringin' him in too. He'll hang for it and that'll be some consolation."

Grace heard her own voice asking the question: "Who killed Frank?"

"It was that young nester, Sam Hogan o' course. He's been sour ever since Frank told him to move his east

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

The sheriff was dead and his killer was about to be lynched. That was when a lady stepped in--one woman against a mob.

fence back—off the land he didn't own. We found the body a mile an' a half from Hogan's place and a lot of the boys knew that was where Frank was heading this morning—to put the fear of the law into this hot headed nester."

"Hogan has been arrested?"

"Yes, ma'am. We went right over and got him. He denied it o' course, but he'll hang after a jury's through with him."

Henry Trask left then. He said, "I'm right sorry, ma'am. All the boys are sorry. Frank Bailey was a good sheriff. He brought the law to these parts." Then Trask backed out of the house and the door closed.

GRACE Bailey sat unmoving, but her mind, cringing from the lonely years ahead, snatched at Trask's last words and savored them. Frank *had* been exactly what he had wanted to be—a good sheriff. He had enforced the law without fear or favor, and it was ironic that he should have been done to death by one of those who had found safety behind the law which was nothing more than Frank Bailey's two guns.

A cattleman at heart, Frank must have loathed the nesters, Grace thought. He'd never put it into words but it must have hurt him to see the fences go up and the prairie grass cut by sharp plows. Yet there had never been any question as to where his loyalty was rooted. Within the law. Always within the law. The would-be farmers were within their legal rights in plowing the prairies. Therefore they worked under the shelter of Frank Bailey's guns. It was as simple as that. And now he had been murdered—by a nester.

The sound of approaching men broke the train of the woman's thoughts. She arose and went to the door. She opened it and they brought Frank Bailey's body inside—large, rough men who had dropped their hats in the yard outside. They laid him on a bed with clumsy gentleness, then stood around with the awkardness of school boys.

"We're a heap sorry, ma'am." one of them said.

"Thank you. Will you please ask Will Lacey to stop over?"

They tiptoed out, grateful for the dismissal, and Grace Bailey dropped to her knees beside the bed. But still the tears wouldn't come. They were hot and burning inside but they wouldn't flow. She patted a lock of her dead husband's hair into place and she was still kneeling when Will Lacey, the undertaker, came softly in, accompanied by two men. She stood up then, straight and dry eyed, and when they carried him away to Will Lacey's establishment, down the street, she walked behind them.

The unrest was already astir as she returned to her home. Along the dusty main street of Lander, there were small groups of men scowling and speaking in low voices. Hot narrowed eyes followed her progress toward the empty house she dreaded to enter. Now and again a voice rose in sharp, angry exclamation.

The unrest was astir.

But Grace Bailey was not conscious of it. Nothing penetrated the walls of her mind except the sounds made by a nervous horse. These sounds came as she opened the small front gate through which they had lately brought the body of her husband.

She skirted the house and found Crazy Head waiting in the poled-in enclosure to the rear. He came to the near fence, snorted, pawed nervously, pushed out his long gray neck.

Grace Bailey rubbed the horse's ears. "You were with him when he died, weren't you, fellow."

Crazy Head knew something was wrong. He pawed at the ground and snorted again, while, out in the main street of Lander—the unrest grew.

The Unrest is a subtle and terrifying thing. In it are all the characteristics of fire. Hatred, smouldering in the mind of a man is ignited by a quick word. A flame is born. The word finds other hatreds in other minds. It feeds and brightens. It crackles and seeks more fuel.

Animals can feel the Unrest. Crazy Head rolled his eyes. Grace Bailey turned from the horse and re-entered her home as the flame of Unrest brightened the skies over the town of Lander.

In the house were three women who had come to comfort the widow of Frank Bailey. Fortunately they were understanding women who sat quietly and said nothing. They sat with her in the neat living room and their presence was a gentle warmth.

They sat while the Unrest grew, while it flamed, until it knocked on Grace Bailey's front door.

The knock was sharp and urgent.

GRACE Bailey opened the door. She found a woman waiting. A young woman with a shawl over her head. Her eyes could have been beautiful, but they were splashed with terror and the beauty was hidden. Her face was no longer her own. It was the face of fear. Her arms were tight against her breast as though they clutched a dead thing.

"I'm Mary Hogan," she whispered. "I've come to you because there's no place else to go—no one to turn to."

"Please come in."

Mary Hogan came into the living room and stood there—crouching, almost at bay. She saw the three women. She looked through them as though they didn't exist—as though nothing existed for her but the Unrest out in the street. She turned back to Grace Bailey:

"There's a mob. All the people. They're going to take my husband out of the jail and—hang him."

The hatred had soaked through the walls and was within the house. One of the women stared coldly. "Why did you come here?"

Mary Hogan shivered. "I—there was no place else." There was a dazed, flatness in her words. Her eyes looked through them, through everything, as though the time were after, not before; as though they had already taken her husband from the jail and had strangled him with a rope. As though it were all over and she had been left alone.

She turned her head toward Grace Bailey and her eyes went with the motion. "Your husband. He stood for law and order. I thought—"

The words stung through the odd mental lethargy that lay in Grace Bailey's mind. It was like the sudden needling of a cold shower out of a dark sky. She seemed to awaken from a dream.

She said, "Yes, child," and turned away.

But she still moved like a person in a dream. There was no sharp return to alertness as she walked back through the house and returned with a shotgun cradled in an arm. She opened the door and walked out into the street and on through the dust toward the jail.

The jail was a small wooden structure at the far end of the main street.

As it came within range of her sight, she was still thinking in the past—in the abstract of memories.

(He went out across the hills once, while I waited through long nights and thought he was dead. Then, one morning, he returned, bringing the Mexican Kid with him. The Mexican Kid's right arm hung loose and bloody. He put the Kid in that jail, and they came in a crowd, with a rope. But he stood in front of the jail while the Kid cringed inside. He held a gun in each hand. He had been on his feet for five days and nights and he was leaning against the door. He yawned and said; "I believe in law and order. You people evidently favor lawlessness and disorder. Any one care to die for his beliefs? Just step forward." None cared to die for their beliefs. They went away.)

Now they were back. The Unrest.

The crowd was still loose, unjointed. It moved back and Grace Bailey walked through a lane of wide eyes and sudden silence. About her, the Unrest crouched, waiting. The nucleus of the mob was a group of men around Henry Trask.

Grace Bailey walked to the jail door, turned, and faced them.

TRASK spoke first. He was drunk now. He wasn't the same man who had stood in the neat living room and had told Grace Bailey that her man was dead.

He said, "Go home. Go about your business. You've got no call to be here."

Grace Bailey pointed the twin-barreled shot gun at the knot of men. The inside of a gun barrel is a dark and forbidding place. It makes men think. Even drunken men think when they look into the barrel of a gun. The knot flattened out and moved backward. It was an instinctive movement. The knot caught itself; came to a self-conscious halt.

A voice called, "It aint decent, you bein' here with a gun. Your dead husband layin' up there and you traipsin' around with a shotgun."

"My husband is dead. That's why I'm here. You intend to hang a man without trial. Frank wouldn't have liked that."

"We'll give 'im a trial. A trial with a rope." There was laughter.

"What proof have you that he's guilty?"

In a mob there is no logic. "What proof you got that he aint?"

"You—Henry Trask. Are you going to let this thing happen? Some of these men will move on after it's over. To a lot of them it's just a side show. A day in a cow town. But you've got to live here afterward. You and Lew Thompson and Jed Neal and all of you men who put a star on Frank Bailey's chest and told him to keep order. After this is over will you hand a badge to some one else and tell *him* you want law in Landers? Will you do that with a straight face?"

Trask's face was dark. "It's for him we're doin' it. For Frank. No lawyer's going to find any loopholes for that skunk in there to crawl out of. Stand aside, Grace."

No reason in a mob. Where she had had sympathy, she was now an enemy. Forgotten were the awkward attempts to comfort the widow. Hoots and coarse jests arose from within the crowd. What had been a hot-headed gesture of sympathy was now a bloodlust. In a moment, Grace Bailey would be swept aside. This she knew.

She drew back one hammer of the shotgun. She pointed the gun toward the ground some five feet in front of

the mob's nucleus. She called out, "Silence, please."

The answer was a roar of voices. She pressed one trigger and the shotgun blast sounded high above all else. Buckshot splashed up from the hard ground in a half-circle.

The lynch-mob tumbled back in mad confusion. There were bellows of rage and snorts of alarm.

"What in tarnation? She'd use that blunderbuss! She'd actually kill a man!"

"Quiet—please."

There was dead silence.

"I'm not going to try reasoning with you. That's a waste of time. Once my husband stood here under similar circumstances and I can only quote from the words he used then:

" 'You people evidently favor lawlessness and disorder. Any one care to die for his beliefs? Just step forward.' "

In such situations, the lust is always for some one else's blood. Not that of the lusters. The Unrest had cooled swiftly under the gentle rain of buckshot. The rear bastions of the mob broke first. Then the front—tottering without support — swirled about and became a crowd of people. Soon this crowd was merely a group of individuals who suddenly remembered personal affairs needing attention.

The danger was past.

GRACE Bailey turned and regarded a white tense face pressed against the bars of the jail door. There was perspiration on the face. Then a smile appeared there; a thin, tight smile.

"Thanks, lady."

Grace Bailey examined the face impersonally. "Did you kill my husband?"

There was a moment of silence. Then, "Lady—which would you rather be taken for, a murderer, or a fool?"

She wanted to claw out at the face; to rip at the bright blue eyes.

"Your wife is at my home."

"I'd appreciate it a lot if you'd take care of her and see that she gets back east with her folks."

Walking back through the dust of the main street, Grace Bailey found herself thinking of the nester's words. A murderer or a fool. An odd thing to say.

At home, she found that the three women had left. To this she gave only a passing thought. A murderer or a fool. What did that mean?

"Maybe I can find out," she said aloud.

Crazy Head was eager for the saddle. He chewed at the bit as though he relished the taste of it. Grace mounted and Crazy Head danced coltishly.

Frank Bailey had ridden off east that morning. The badlands lay to the east. And, farther on, the lush grazing areas onto which the nesters had brought their children and their wives and their plows. To the south, lay the gigantic spread of the Split Diamond, and, beyond Apache Ridge, the smaller outfits, which fed beef into the railhead of Landers.

Grace had no difficulty in picking up the outgoing prints of Crazy Head. His small, shod hooves were distinctive. The tracks led in a reasonably straight line toward the badlands. Grace rode to the left of the clear trail, and the tracking was simple. She had only to follow the path of least resistance through the sage and

lava rock, just as her husband had followed it earlier.

A half hour passed, and Landers dropped from sight. The sun threw a shadow ahead as the gray danced along. Ahead, the badlands reared jaggedly—a two-mile-wide stretch of fault, forming a west boundary for the rich lands beyond. Grace approached the grim strip at a canter.

Just at its edge, she reined up sharply. The tracks she had been following began to tell a story. Here indecision had come upon Frank Bailey. The tracks of Crazy Head were imprinted haphazardly into the brittle alkali patch skirting the rock of the badlands. Grace Bailey sat visualizing the scene. Crazy Head dancing against the rein pressure. Frank Bailey hesitating. Why?

Had someone been approaching? What had caught his attention? Or had it been a sudden change of plans?

This last seemed most logical, because, after a period of milling about, Crazy Head had settled into stride, moving south in the good going along the badland stretch.

Obviously, Frank Bailey had either decided against, or postponed his visit to the Hogan place. But where would the new track-line lead? And why the change in direction?

THE last question was soon answered. A new set of prints veered in and joined the ones she trailed. The prints of a horse shod fore but not rear; of a horse with a split left hind hoof.

The two lines merged and trailed south. Evidently Frank Bailey had been hailed by another lone rider. This rider had urged him into a new direction and had accompanied him.

Grace Bailey followed the line, her pulse quickening.

An hour later, with the sun reddening the west she was well into the grazing lands of the Split Diamond. Five minutes later she reined up sharply.

A mute pattern of disaster lay before her on the ground.

Crazy Head had pulled up suddenly; he had reared. The deep hind hoofprints showed starkly. In that spot, a body had fallen heavily and, over here a man in high heeled boots had dismounted and run to the body. Then the man had stalked the prancing Crazy Head and had brought the horse back over some twenty yards.

Quite obviously, he had then laid the body across Crazy Head's saddle and had remounted his own, split-hoofed horse.

Now the trail started off again, leading north, with enough of an eastern angle to miss the southern tip of the badland stretch and find the grass land of the squatters.

Grace Bailey loped swiftly through the purple of late afternoon, praying that she could beat the dusk. The going was easy now, the line of travel straight toward some objective. Soon she reached that objective—the spot, a mile or so from the Hogan place, where her husband's body had been dropped to the ground.

Split-Hoof had reversed and gone galloping back toward the Split Diamond. Crazy Head's previous path meandered in the general direction of Landers. He had stopped at times, pawed the earth, then had moved on.

Grace Bailey felt a sudden release within herself; a quick surge of pent-up energy; a breaking of emotional tightness. She roweled at Crazy Head's flanks and the surprised beast leaped into stride and leveled off toward home. Grace Bailey gripped

hard with her knees and felt the wind pouring back through her hair. The desert and the dusk flew by.

Now she knew the answer to "murderer or fool". Hogan had meant that he, as a nester, existed because of the protection of the law. Without it the squatters were through. Frank Bailey had functioned as this protection. So, for Hogan to kill Frank Bailey over so paltry a thing as moving a fence, would have been like cutting off a leg to erase the pain of a sore foot.

The true killer had moved boldly, apparently sure of success. He had pointed the murder at Hogan even in the face of this sound logic. Why?

The answer to this came as Crazy Head beat on toward Landers. The killer had deliberately banked upon Unrest. Mobs bent upon lynching are stirred by basic loyalties and are led by frenzy, not by reason. Then, after the deed of violence, the mob shuns reason because of guilt. The individual components of the mob have no wish to be confronted with proof of error.

Thus, in the case of Hogan, his death would have ended all inquiry. The inconsistency of his act would not have been discussed, nor would the truth, written plainly by the movements of two horses, ever have been investigated.

Darkness had fallen by the time Crazy Head was back in his stable, noisily munching oats. But Grace Bailey did not stop for food. After caring for the horse, she visited three saloons on the main street of Lander. One after the other, she entered and left. In the fourth, she approached a group of men crowding the bar.

THEY regarded her with uncertainty. A trace of sheepishness was written on their faces, and, to a man, they were inarticulate.

Grace Bailey was interested in only one of them; one who stood in the center of the group, an elbow upon the bar.

The woman said, "Hello, Hank. I've been looking for you."

Henry Trask didn't remove his hat. He scowled slightly, then showed his white teeth in a smile. "I see you left your gun at home."

Grace Bailey regarded him levelly. "That was possibly an oversight," she replied. She reached out and drew a six shooter from the nearest holster. Its cowpoke owner made a vague, surprised pass through the air as Grace Bailey turned the gun on Trask.

"Hank," she asked. "are you still riding that big buckskin? The one with the split hoof?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You stopped at the house not long ago and Frank commented on that hoof. Remember? He said you should have turned the horse to pasture."

"Well?"

"You should have taken his advice."

Trask straightened suddenly. "You're talking crazy. Come on. I'll take you home."

Grace Bailey looked along the gun barrel and said, "Stay where you are, Hank."'

The big man subsided, warily.

"You don't feel that the squatters have any right cutting up the land, do you? You know that when they've failed, from lack of water, and gone on to new stakes, the ground they've worked will be useless for grazing."

"Any fool knows that," Trask growled.

"And you knew that you could never chase them out as long as Frank was alive."

A dead hush filled the saloon. Men moved closer to the group; moved on tiptoe. Hank Trask ran his tongue over dry lips.

"You're grief's gone to your head!"

"No, Hank. Grief makes a woman think clearly. It made me saddle Crazy Head and follow Frank's trail. It's all out there, written on the surface of the ground."

The silence crackled.

"You killed my husband, Hank."

No one moved. Then the lean cowpoke, who owned a small spread beyond the ridge, put out a hand and gently relieved Grace of the gun. He kept it trained on Trask.

"You followed the tracks, Mrs. Bailey?"

"I followed them. You can do the same. You can put twelve men on horses. They can follow them, too."

Other men were sliding guns into their hands. Faces were dark.

"You go on home now, Mrs. Bailey. Guess we can show this hombre down to the jailhouse."

The scene was a cold one—grim and deadly—but Grace Bailey felt suddenly warm inside. These men had respected her husband. In their unspoken way they had loved him. Their love and respect was mirrored in the deadliness of this scene. She turned and walked from the saloon and up the dark dusty street.

Alone again, she sat in her unlighted parlor, staring into black shadows. From now on it would always be this way. Alone. Gone was the elation of her accomplishment. She had saved a man unjustly accused. Her husband's murderer would answer to the law. But her husband was dead and nothing would change that.

Softly, she began to weep. Time passed—unmeasured time.

THEN, sounds from the street drifted into the dark room. Vague at first, they gradually took definite form. The quick angry shouts became potent with meaning. The sound of running feet was no longer aimless.

The Unrest.

Grace Bailey dried her tears and moved to the window and looked out on the main street of Lander. Tight little groups of men formed and broke apart, only to reform into larger groups. Several leaders exhorted in angry tones. Men moved from one leader to another, listened and applauded.

They were planning to lynch Henry Trask! Grace realized this with a sharp intake of breath. Then, suddenly, fiercely, she was glad.

Let them hang the killer to the highest tree. What right had he to the life he'd taken from Frank Bailey? Why shouldn't justice be served in the speediest possible way?

There were loopholes in the law. There were clever lawyers who spent their time finding these holes. Henry Trask would have the cleverest lawyer money could buy.

Grace Bailey left the window. She sat stiff and tight in a rocking chair and rocked back and forth without consciousness of movement. The chair squeaked in monotonous rhythm. The chair said, hang—him—high. Hang—him—high. Hang—him—high.

Outside the crowd surged and grew and the volume of sound rose in the night air. Inside, Grace Bailey felt a hotly satisfying kinship with the crowd—the mob. They were friends! They were going about the business of seeing that justice was done. When

they were through, it would be known far and wide that Frank Bailey had been avenged.

Tonight a corpse would dangle, and the thought of it made the blood tingle in Grace Bailey's veins.

She stopped rocking—stopped suddenly. There had been an odd, hysterical giggle. A strange alien sound from her own throat. She sat tense.

Outside the Unrest soared to a roar and became a moving thing. Again she sought the window. Flares had been lighted.

Maybe they planned to burn him, she thought, wildly. Burn! Kill! Avenge!

Grace Bailey stood in the darkness and felt the grip of that obscene force that turns men into unreasoning beasts. The blood lust. The snarl of the wolf pack.

The mob was trailing up the main street now. On to the jail! Drag out the prisoner. Beat, kick and torture. Bestiality was the order of things.

She felt suddenly weak as the reaction of strong emotions chopped at her muscles. She sought the rocking chair. In her lungs was a smothered feeling as though she had run a long way.

A shout of brittle laughter hit her ears and, at the same moment, Crazy Head neighed into the hot still air. Again the horse sensed the unrest and was afraid.

Grace Bailey rushed blindly toward her bedroom. She flung herself down on the bed, her face deep against the woolen blanket. A pain shot through her groin. She rolled over. She reached down and picked up a hard, cold object.

Frank Bailey's gun.

SLOWLY the woman came erect. She sat stiffly on the edge of the bed. Holding the gun tightly in one hand, she passed the other hand across her forehead. A strange, singing silence rang in her ears and she had the feeling of one dazed; of one recovering from a madness—a sickening nightmare.

And, in her mind, she saw Frank Bailey, staggering after five days and nights in the saddle. Frank Bailey leaning against the door of the flimsy wooden jail; leaning there with steel in his eyes and two guns in his hands and saying:

"Any one care to die for his beliefs? Just step forward."

Grace Bailey lifted the gun to her bosom and pressed it tenderly. Then she laid it carefully down on the bed.

A few moments later, she appeared at her own front door. She crossed the small front yard and was in the street. She walked with firm steps toward the jail, moving in the wake of the lynch-mob.

Cradled in her arm was a shining shotgun.

THE END.

Lazy Man's Way

WEBSTER Pratt was the kind of man who didn't see mto mind when people laughed at him. Webster weighed close to three hundred pounds. He was also a fairly tall man.

"Just how tall do you figger you be, Webster," Sam Bain asked.

"Oh, about six-two in my bare feet," Webster said.

"I didn't think you'd know," Sam said, and he winked around at the other men in the saloon.

"Why not?"

"Because I b'lieve you're just too durn lazy to take off your shoes and stockings to find out."

Sam was a card. Everybody in the saloon was laughing. Webster joined in, even though it was at his expense. All his chins shook and his huge paunch went up and down. He laughed so hard it seemed he might break the specially reinforced chair that had been built for his use.

"What gets me," Sam said after the laughter had died down, "is how a man as fat and as lazy as you ever come to take up prospecting. Or how you ever got up the energy to come way up here to the Yukon."

"Didn't take much energy. I got on a boat and it did the work. A mule brought me the rest of the way."

"Well, it sure beat all," Ed Jackson put in. "You must have thought all you had to do was scatter a few nuggets on the ground and the gold would just grow until it was ripe enough to pluck."

"Now, you know that ain't so," Webster said. "First thing I did was to stake me out a claim."

"Which you ain't never worked."

"Ain't my fault if there's no water," Webster protested.

"Plenty of water on the other side of your gully wall. All you got to do is cut your way through to the river and build yourself a sluice."

"That's what I figured on doing. But when I saw how much work it was going to be I just naturally backed off. Anyway, the gold ain't going to run away. Some day I'll figure out a way to get the job done."

"You could use that dynamite you bought," Sam suggested.

"Still leave a lot of work, though. And I'd have the sluice still to build."

"It's a wonder you're not too lazy to eat."

"You fellows can talk all you want," Webster said. "I don't see that any of you have grubbed out much gold. It's brains that get things done in this world."

Sam had a witty reply ready but he held it back when the saloon door opened. At sight of the two men who came in Sam's face grew hard. There was a long silence that was broken only when someone cursed under his breath.

GOLD is a magnet that draws all kinds of men. In the Yukon college professors found themselves rubbing elbows with illiterates, farmers with city men, realists with dreamers. There was room in the Yukon for almost anyone, even for a Webster Pratt.

And there were those, like the two who had just come in, who made room for themselves. They came neither to toil nor spin. Most men carried guns, but these wore theirs with

by H. B. Hickey

When some men get in trouble they act fast. But there are other men who like to take their time before acting —the lazy man's way . . .

the intention of using them in place of the pick and shovel. Let the next man wear out his feet and his courage searching. When the search was successful and back breaking labor had established the value of a claim, men like these hovered about like vultures.

These two claimed to be on their way up to Dawson, but they were in no apparent hurry to get there. For three days now they had wandered about, poking their noses into every claim.

"Howdy, gents," said the taller one, a burly, black-bearded man who said his name was Jason. "My friend Alec and I were just saying how the sun is getting stronger every day."

"Reckon it is," Ed Jackson grunted. "If you don't start for Dawson soon you'll get caught by the spring thaw."

That was more than a hint, it was practically an invitation to leave town. But neither Jason nor Alec seemed offended. Alec had a shrill voice that went well with his ratlike features.

"What's so special about Dawson? Sometimes a man can get a better break in a small place. The competition isn't so keen."

He laughed unpleasantly and Jason said, "Shut up, Alec." Then he looked around at the men.

"How about a game of poker to kill the time?"

"Not today," Sam Bain said quickly.

Jason's eyes narrowed and his black brows came down in a straight line over them. His hand dropped to the bottom button of his sheepskin and stayed there, hovering only inches from the butt of the gun which was holstered at his hip.

"Well?" Sam Bain said, his own eyes bright and hard. Ed Jackson had his right hand inside his coat, where his knife would be.

"No," Jason said coolly. "Not right now, anyway."

Then he jerked his head at his smaller companion and they turned and walked out.

For a while nobody said anything. Webster Pratt put his pipe in his mouth and reached around the back of his chair to the pocket of his sheepskin for a match. But it was a long reach. Webster got tired of digging in the pocket. He took the unlit pipe out of his mouth.

"That wasn't very neighborly of you, Sam," he said. "Fellow asks for a game, seems to me you could have turned him down a little more pleasantly."

Sam's voice was harsh. There was no humor in him now.

"If I had my way those two would never leave this town alive!"

"Now, Sam—" Webster said mildly. Bain glared at him.

"What's the matter with you, Webster? Don't you know a lousy claim-jumper when you see one? Dirty dogs! Waiting around till someone makes a strike, ready to plug him in the back. I can smell that kind a mile away. The only answer I'd have for him would be a belly full of lead!"

"I say let's run them out before they make any trouble," Ed Jackson agreed.

It looked for a moment as though he were going to get action on his proposal. But there is always inertia to overcome before men can rouse themselves from comfortable seats around a stove. Webster's voice filled the gap.

"Doesn't seem right to me, somehow. So far they haven't done anything wrong. Maybe they're not as bad as you say."

"You haven't been up in this country long," Sam told him. "You'll learn."

"Maybe. Anyway, they've probably gone quite a distance already and we'd have to be chasing them."

They stared at him for a moment, and then they began to laugh. Even Sam Bain's good humor was restored.

"Webster, I don't b'lieve you'd have the pep to get out of that chair if it was on fire," he chuckled.

"There you go again, Sam. Always talking about pep and work and things like that. It's brains that does the trick. I've got me a likely looking claim, and some day I'm going to see it pay off. And I won't break my back doing it."

He knew they thought he was crazy. But they liked him despite that. When Webster got up to leave, Sam helped him on with his outsize sheepskin. The pockets of the coat bulged with things Webster had bought but been too lazy to put away when he got home.

"You're a lamb among wolves, Webster," Sam told him. "A man like you has no business in this country. You're soft, and to lick the Yukon a man has got to be hard."

THE mule sagged in the middle under the weight of the huge man on its back. It moved slowly but Webster didn't mind. He was never in any great hurry. Besides, it was Sunday, and if he did not share the working days with the rest he at least kept the Sabbath with them.

Coming around the last bend he caught sight of the cabin nestling in the gully he had staked out as his claim. He thought he detected movement there in the shadows of the gulch. But when he looked again he saw nothing.

Another prospector would have proceeded cautiously, but that was not Webster's way. He let the mule pick its way down the trail, straight for the cabin door. And nothing happened.

Despite his bulk Webster ate a surprisingly meager supper. When that was done he broke the ice in his water bucket and rinsed off his plate. Then he lay down on his bunk and smoked his pipe until he was sleepy.

Most lazy men are slovenly, but not so Webster Pratt. He was awake at dawn. His breakfast would consist of only coffee and stale bread, but before he ate he heated water and washed himself thoroughly.

Afterward, he brought in a bucket of snow, set it on the fire until it turned into boiling water, and then washed his only other shirt.

They were all small tasks he performed, but he moved so slowly that hours passed before he ventured out of the cabin. He hesitated at the door and looked back at a sack in the far corner. It contained the dynamite Sam had spoken of.

Webster had an urge to go back and get the stuff and perhaps set to work. But he fought the urge down. Tomorrow was another day. Today he would just take a light pick and peck around as he always did.

Strangely enough, Webster believed there was gold in the gully. He simply reasoned that if his belief proved justified there was as much chance it would be near the surface as that it would be deep down. So why dig deep?

He was tapping away at the east end of the gully, where the rock seemed somehow softer, when Jason and Alec slid down the opposite side.

Webster heard them coming, but he was so slow in turning around that they were only a few feet away when he came around. Jason looked affable but Alec had his hand deep in his pocket and his face was unsmiling.

"How's it going?" Jason asked.

"Slow," Webster admitted. It had taken him an hour to chip away a few inches of rock.

"Figure to find anything?"

"If I didn't," Webster said, "would I be working away like this?"

At that Jason broke into a coarse laugh. But when he spoke his voice was cold and deadly.

"You tub of lard! You couldn't bend over to pick up a nugget if it was right in front of you! Here, take a look at this."

He dug into his pocket and produced a chunk of rock. Webster looked down and saw that it was shot through with yellow streaks.

"Do you know where we found this?" Jason said. "Right here in this gully yesterday!"

"Get your hands up!" Alec said suddenly as Webster took a forward step. The little man's hand came out of his pocket and there was a gun in it.

So Sam and Ed Jackson were right, Webster thought. But his thoughts did not show on his round and placid face.

"Mind if I keep my hands down?" he said. "Quite a bother holding them over my head."

"Don't much matter either way," Jason told him. "In a few minutes you'll be getting a permanent rest. I was going to plug you in the back, but Alec figures you'd be too heavy to carry off where we can plant you."

"Turn around and start walking," Alec said.

Webster's eyes were very thoughtful. These fellows meant what they said. In a few minutes Webster Pratt would be a dead man. He took his time about turning around.

"You fellows'd be foolish to kill me," he said over his shoulder.

"Why?" That was Jason. "You ain't too big to bury. Nobody will ever find you."

"Maybe so. But I got this claim recorded, and I provided that if anything happens to me Sam Bain gets it."

He heard Jason suck in a breath. Then the burly claim-jumper stepped forward and smashed his fist into the side of Webster's neck. The blow knocked Webster down and he rolled onto his side and then came up on his knees shaking his head. When he climbed unsteadily to his feet the side of his face was red, but his expression remained unchanged.

"That won't do you any good," he said. "If you want to talk sense, though, I might make you a proposition."

"Let him have his say," Alec muttered. "I can always plug him if he makes a funny move."

"No funny moves," Webster told them. "My life ain't worth much, but I value it anyway. Here's my proposition: you let me go and I'll deed over this claim to you."

"What if you change your mind later?" Alec said suspiciously.

"We'll write it out in legal form. You'll have two witnesses to my one."

A COLD sweat started on Webster's brow as Alec's finger fidgeted on the trigger. They were still suspicious. But Webster's proposition was very attractive. Murder was always a dangerous business. At best their position would be precarious. With Webster Pratt alive they could not be accused of claim-jumping.

"I've got paper and pen and ink in my cabin," Webster said.

"If we don't like what he writes we can always kill him," Alec mused aloud.

"All right," Jason said. "I can't read so good, but you ought to know."

Without further discussion they marched Webster to the cabin. Once inside, they ordered him to sit at the table with his hands in full view on top. He told Jason where to find the pen and ink and paper. Once, before he began to write, Webster looked up.

"You'll have to give me something, say five dollars, to make it legal."

Jason looked at Alec and Alec nodded. The black bearded man threw a gold coin onto the table next to the paper. Webster scrutinized it, then began to write. When he was finished he signed his name and handed the paper to Jason.

"You read it," Jason said to Alec. He drew his own gun and covered Webster before handing over the deed to his partner.

Alec began to read.

" 'I, Webster Pratt, for the sum of five dollars in gold, and other valuable considerations, do hereby sell and otherwise transfer any interest I may have in the property known as Number Sixty-two in the North-West quarter of the West half of the North Section of Township Eleven of the North County of the North-East Quarter of the Territory of the Yukon to the holders of this deed. Signed: Webster Pratt.' "

"Is that the way it ought to be?" Jason demanded.

"That's the way they write them in the recorder's office," Alec admitted.

"Why ain't our names in there?"

"I don't know your full names," Webster said. "But I left a space for them."

Alec returned the paper to him and as they told him their names he wrote them into the space he had left. Alec was laughing as Webster handed back the deed.

" 'Other valuable considerations.' That's pretty rich." he chortled.

"What does that mean?" Jason demanded.

"This." Alec pointed to his gun. "It's a very valuable consideration when it's aimed at a man's head."

Webster stared up at them. His face was set in mournful lines. His brown eyes were slightly moist, as though he were going to cry.

"It's a shame," he said sadly. "I could have got rich off this claim. One of these days I was going to blow a hole through the gully wall to the river and build a sluice."

Jason looked thoughtful and then jerked his head up abruptly.

"What you were going to do don't mean a thing," he snarled. "Now get up and get going. Get off our property!"

SAM BAIN came roaring into the saloon as though he had a pack of wolves after him. His face was a mask of wrath.

"Those two skunks jumped Webster's claim!" he yelled. "I just seen them working it."

Then he saw Webster sitting there on the other side of the stove and his eyes almost popped out of his head. "I thought they'd killed you," Sam gasped.

"That's what I thought too," Ed Jackson said. "But here he is, as big as life. And not even ashamed.

"When I seen them two picking away I run and got Bill Daley and Bob Jones and we started over to do some stringing up," he went on to explain. "We felt like fools when Jason and his partner hauled out a paper with Pratt's name scrawled all over it."

"You mean—?" Sam gasped. "What did you go and do that for, Webster?"

"For five dollars," Jackson said. "When they showed me that I didn't bother to read no more."

Scorn dripped from his words. He looked at Webster, then turned his head and loosed a stream of tobacco juice against the stove. The gesture told exactly how he felt about Webster Pratt.

"So that's how it is," Sam said. "They put on the pressure and Pratt sold out to them for five bucks. And now they've got the claim nice and legal and there ain't a durn thing we can do about it."

Bain was not a big man but he was an aggressive one. For a second it seemed that he was going to hit Webster. Webster made no move to defend himself, but Bain stayed where he was, still leaning forward.

"I can stand a lazy man," he said slowly. "I can even stomach a tinhorn gambler. But one thing I can't abide, and that's a yellow bellied dog! A man who will give up his claim without a fight is a yellow dog. If you ever speak to me again, Pratt, I'll spit in your face!"

Webster watched their faces. Jackson, Daley, Jones, Bain; they were all staring at him as at some vermin. Then one by one they turned their backs on him and walked away.

A man can live without much food, or without decent shelter and clothing. But he cannot live without the regard of his neighbors. Especially in a raw hard country like the Yukon.

Rather than be subjected to the daily scorn of the men around him anyone else would have pulled up stakes and left for good. Webster Pratt seemed even too lazy to do that. He stayed in town.

As long as his money was accepted he had a room and he had food and drink. And all day long every day he sat in his chair before the stove in the saloon, his enormous sheepskin coat around him. There were no more jokes at his expense. When the other men came in they congregated at the bar now.

Webster might have been dead, as far as they were concerned. Sometimes he heard his claim mentioned, but no one looked at him. He knew from their talk that Jason and Alec were hard at work. He knew the day when they started picking at the gully wall. He knew the day when they began to build the sluices.

Still Webster sat there, his head bowed in thought.

And then there was that Sunday morning when he needed no secondhand news. There was a dull booming that shook the windows of the saloon and brought Webster erect for a moment. Only a dynamite explosion could have produced that sound.

Then Webster sank back again, his hands jammed deep in the oversize pockets of his coat. He was still there

when the men began to drift in. They looked at him this day, hard and bitter looks that were meant to shame him.

IT WAS slightly past noon that Jason and Alec came in, their faces bright and flushed with gloating. They had the look of men who have eaten their fill but are greedy for more. If they saw Webster they gave no sign of it as they swaggered to the bar.

"Drinks for everyone in the house!" Jason shouted. "On me and my partner!"

There was a sudden lull in the conversation which had been going on. And there was a momentary hesitation. It looked as though Jason's treat was going to be refused. Then Ed Jackson swung his gaze from Jason to Webster and back again, and Ed reached for his glass.

This was more than an acceptance. It was a deliberate insult to Webster to drink with the men who had pushed him out.

Jason was quick to catch the meaning of the gesture. He laughed shortly and swung around to face the fat man who sat all alone beside the pot-bellied stove.

"How about you, Pratt? Care to join us?"

For a long second Webster regarded him gravely. Then the huge man slowly rose, his hands still deep in his coat pockets, and cleared his throat.

"I hear that you and your partner have been working my claim while I've been in town," he said in his mild tone.

A sudden hush fell over the room. Jason's smile changed to a scowl, and then became a sneer of contempt.

"What are you trying to pull? You sold out to us and you know it!"

"Did I?" Webster said.

"You know you did! And if anyone doesn't believe me I've got the paper right here in my pocket for proof."

"You have? Read it," Webster suggested.

Jason hauled the folded sheet of paper from his pocket, looked at it, and turned red with embarrassment. He handed it to his partner. "Go on and read it," he said curtly.

"'. . . the property known . . .'" Alec read as the men listened in silence, "'as Number Sixty-two in the North-West quarter of the West half of the North Section of Township Eleven of the North County of the North-East Quarter of the Territory of the Yukon . . .'"

ALEC looked up and stopped abruptly at the sudden grunt that came from Sam Bain's lips. The men were staring at each other in open mouthed amazement. Then Sam and Ed Jackson began to laugh.

"What's going on here?" Jason demanded in bewilderment.

"I don't rightly know," Sam said. "Maybe there is such a place, and maybe Webster Pratt owns it. But if there is, it's a mighty long way from here. Right now you're standing in the North-East quarter of the West Section . . . But why go on? You get the idea."

"I think he does," Webster said. "It looks like I made some mistakes and that paper ain't legal after all."

Webster's left hand came out of his coat pocket with surprising swiftness and swung outward toward Jason. Something shiny and glittering spun through the air and landed at Jason's feet. It was a gold coin.

"Here's your five dollars back," Webster said.

Then his right hand was sliding out of his other pocket. There was a gun in that hand. It was an enormous .44 but in Webster's great paw it seemed a toy.

"And here's the 'other valuable considerations'," Webster said. "I'm paying you back in full."

Maybe it was because the gun in his hand seemed so small and ineffectual; maybe it was because Webster Pratt looked so fat and foolish; at any rate, something led Alec to believe he had a chance. He went for his gun.

The gun in Webster's hand roared once and the front of Alec's coat suddenly had a hole in it. The little rat-faced man pitched forward onto the floor.

Jason was digging at his holster and Webster's gun swung around to cover him. The .44 roared again and Jason was lifted and flung backward against the bar by the slug that caught him over the heart. A trickle of blood ran out of his mouth, and then the blood stopped and he was still.

"So that's the way it was," Sam Bain's voice cut through the silence that followed the shooting. "You should have told us before, Webster."

"Many was the time I felt like telling you," Webster admitted. "But I was afraid it might spoil things if I did."

His face was sad for a moment in recollection of the weary hours and days he had sat alone. Then a slow smile spread over its vast expanse.

"You know," he said, "I sometimes wondered, sitting here so lonesome, if they'd ever get that gully wall blown and those sluices built."

(The End)

DODGE CITY INCIDENT

DODGE CITY in 1877 was the end of the trail for thousands of Texas longhorns, and their drivers inevitably wanted to celebrate. Wyatt Earp, one of the greatest of frontier peace officers, was marshal of the town, and he drew a Dead Line. Texans in the mood to cut loose had to stay within certain limits.

Earp's predecessor as marshal had made a practice of granting special privileges to influential cattlemen. Earp would not do this. He insisted that the wealthy herdowners had no more right to shoot up the town than did ordinary cowhands.

Tobe Driskill, a sure enough cattle king, arrived from Texas one day with a large herd, and made a good sale. He felt he had to celebrate; in fact, after he had taken on a goodly amount of whiskey, he felt he had to show Dodge City how a Texan could celebrate. He had a call to shoot Front Street wide open.

Now everyone had to check their guns when they came into town, and the guns were supposed to remain on the rack until their owners departed. But a certain faction in the town resented Earp's actions in enforcing the laws against carrying guns and disturbing the peace. Someone returned Driskill's guns to him.

Inspired and fortified by a large quantity of liquor, Tobe burst out the door of the saloon bellowing his intentions, and punctuating his remarks with blazing sixguns. Just like in the old days, bystanders ran for cover, peering out from safe places to watch the excitement.

The alert marshal soon heard what was going on. Driskill hadn't progressed very far when Earp came running. Before Driskill knew what was happening he had been knocked flat, his guns taken from him, and a strong hand had him by the collar and propelled him straight toward the calaboose, into which he was heaved without further ado.

This forthright treatment was much more effective than if Earp had brought his own guns into play. This was humiliating to the pride and conceit of Driskill.

The word soon spread that Driskill was in jail. The business he brought to Dodge City was worth half a million dollars a year, and it was no small matter that he had been publicly cut down to size. Pressure was brought to bear on the mayor, but he insisted that Earp had full authority, and would do nothing. Earp's response to fervent pleas to release Driskill at once was that Driskill was entitled to less consideration than a

plain, ignorant cowhand, because he certainly knew better, and that he had to stay in jail at least until morning.

Driskill's outfit, camped outside of town, were furious, and decided to rescue their leader. The foreman was a professional fighting man, and he led some twenty-five cowhands into town, yelling their defiance, and leading a horse for Tobe's getaway. They pulled up in front of the jail, and one ran to the nearby blacksmith shop for a sledgehammer. While waiting, the others kept their guns drawn, and bawled their boasts, daring the Dodge City peace officers to stop them.

Wyatt Earp arrived just as a cowboy started pounding at the jail door with a sledgehammer. Wyatt, alone and without drawing his gun, walked into the midst of the group of angry men, and ordered them away.

It is a tribute to the force of Earp's personality that the men did just that. Earp kept his eyes on the foreman, who no doubt realized he was slated for Boot Hill if he made a single hostile move. He wheeled his horse and started out of town, and his troop of killers followed him. Wyatt watched till they were out of sight, then went about his business.

Next morning, Tobe Driskill was released from jail. But first, he paid a fine of one hundred dollars. Cattle king or not, Wyatt Earp saw to it that his punishment fitted his crime.

BUTTE BATTLE

BUTTE, "the richest hill on earth," for it is built on copper mines, back in the '80's and '90's was also called the toughest town on earth. It was a place where anything could happen, and frequently did. One of the most unbelievable fracases ever recorded occurred there, a boxing bout that ran for one hundred and five rounds, probably the longest bout ever fought.

The contestants were John Gallagher, a miner, and G. H. Ward, a carpenter. The bout was arranged in the spirit of the old time duel, to avenge an insult which one of the men had made to the other. What the slighting remark was that started the whole thing off doesn't matter, but it was sufficient for the friends of the two, who were spoiling for a good fight. It was decided, therefore, that the two men should battle it out, using London prize ring rules, under which the fighters used their bare fists, and practically anything went.

Whoever managed the affair saw to it that there was a referee, dignified in frock coat, whose chief duty was to count off the rounds. The audience was carefully checked to make certain that Gallagher supporters balanced Ward supporters in numbers, in case of a free-for-all; and all were required to leave their guns and knives at the door, also just in case. Technically, the affair was not strictly legal, but several police occupied complimentary ringside seats.

The fight was held in the Crystal Springs Roadhouse just outside of Butte. The owner of the place prepared for the occasion by putting in an extra bar, and he and his men were kept very busy all evening supplying the thirsty audience with drinks.

The fight began at eight P.M., under oil lamps. After a short interval of sparring, the contestants mixed it up in earnest, and from then on the fight was gory enough for the most bloodthirsty of the spectators. The fighters yelled and cursed as they waded into each other, and the customers urged them on with increasing abandon, while the drinks flowed faster and ever more freely as the hours wore away.

Ward seemed to be having a little the better of it, as round followed round. Then came the forty-eighth round, and Gallagher's backers groaned in despair as their man was knocked head over heels, and they heard the sound of a cracking bone. But a little thing like a broken arm could not daunt Gallagher, and he returned to the fray with fresh fury. His backers sighed with relief, and had themselves another drink.

Hour after hour; round after round; the audience were as groggy with alcohol as the boxers were with blood and battering. Still no knockout. Finally, in the ninety-seventh round, it came. Gallagher fell flat on his back.

Quickly, someone administered a strong stimulant—they called it wildcat juice—and Gallagher revived and was hoisted to his feet. With his good fist he struck out, caught his opponent off guard, and knocked Ward unconscious.

This time Ward received the wildcat juice, and such was its potency that he got to his feet, and the fight was on again.

Both men were exhausted by now, and Ward had been injured by that last blow. The remainder of the fight was only an uncertain fumbling. As the one hundred and fifth round started, Gallagher tapped his opponent on the side of the head, and Ward collapsed, this time for good. Neither alcohol, pleading, nor swearing could bring forth any signs of life. The judges agreed that Ward had been defeated. Gallagher was declared the winner.

Everyone hastened to the bar to toast the champion, though it was almost dawn. Some finally remembered Ward, and when they went to take care of him, discovered that he was in a bad way. Quickly, the audience deserted the roadhouse, for after all the whole thing was not exactly legal, and the death of a contestant might spell trouble.

The next day Ward died. The police half-heartedly tried to find Gallagher, but he had conveniently disappeared, and no one seemed to know anything about the affair. The case was closed.

—FRAN FERRIS

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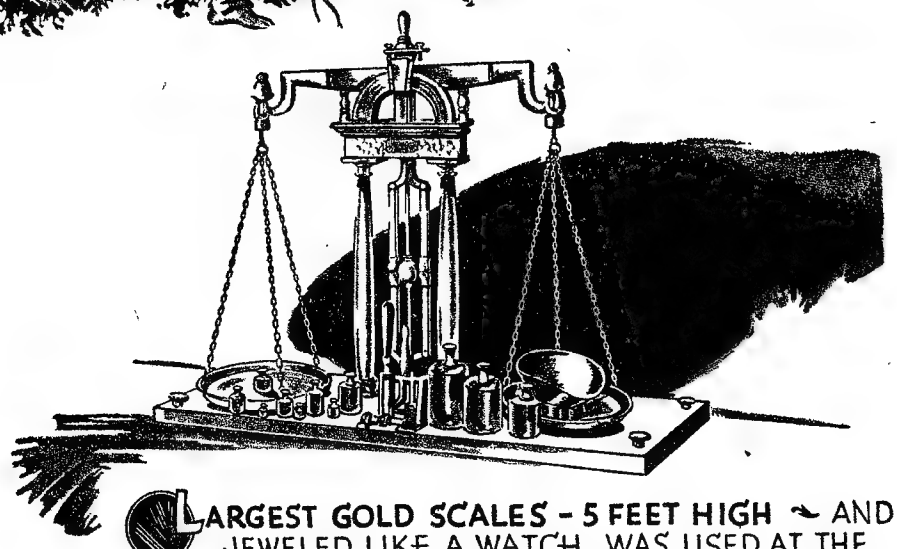

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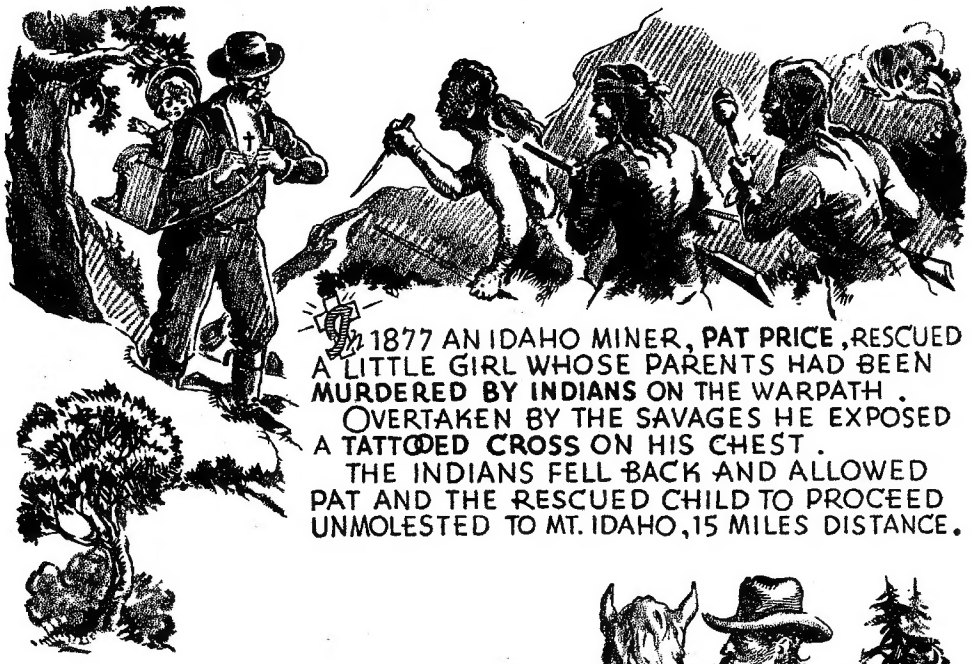

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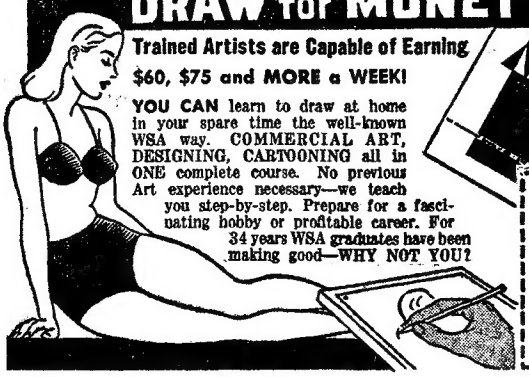
DEATH ON THE TRAIL

TERROR walked the pioneer trails to the West the year that cholera struck the hardest. It was 1849, and the gold rush to California was on. The traffic was many times greater than at any previous season, camp sites were crowded, and polluted wells spread the disease like wildfire.

The bewildered emigrants were completely ignorant and mystified as to what caused the disease. Those who boiled their drinking water did so only in the process of making coffee or tea, as they had no knowledge of the action of germs which could be present in unboiled water.

The disease apparently came over from Europe, and up the Mississippi from New Orleans on the river boats, up the Mississippi to the towns where men prepared for their journey across the prairies and mountains into the west. Along with the wagon trains it went, and none could say where it would strike next.

Fortunately, that was one of the best years for grass ever known, lessening the work of searching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for forage along the way. For the well members of a caravan must do the work of the sick, and care for them as well. Women worked to the limit of their strength along with the men, and were stricken as often.

The onslaught of the horror was sudden and violent. A man might rise in the morning feeling fine, and be buried by nightfall. The illness was often accompanied by great agony.

Often, so terror-stricken were the people, sufferers would simply be abandoned because no one would run the risk of caring for them. As the frenzy grew, some travelers drove their animals day and night in an effort to escape the plague. Newly dug graves dotted the trailsides that year, especially in the Platte Valley region, where the pestilence rose to its height.

Hundreds of the travelers turned about and headed for home, as the hysteria increased. Most of them, however, even though griefstricken by personal loss, horrified by the scenes of death about them, and numb with terror of their own fate, managed to keep going. Working at immediate tasks of procuring food for the animals and humans, finding time to bury the dead and care for the sick, and still make their daily mileage forward, they continued their trek into the future.

—A. Morris

THE SHOOTING OF RATTLESNAKE JAKE

IT WOULD probably be hard to prove that one place or another was the roughest and shootinest part of the old west, but if the proof lay in more onery and mean characters per acre, the honor would undoubtedly go to the Montana "Badlands" back in the early "80's." Even today it is one of the most inaccessible parts of the United States. In the badlands' extent of more than 150 miles there are still only four roads, three of them nothing but crooked trails. This impassable country naturally served as a haven for men who had been run out of other parts of the country. In the early "80's," an organized band of murderers, rustlers, bushwhackers, renegades and thieves set up headquarters in the badlands. These wanted men had the territory so well under control that honest ranchers never dared to go near the "breaks," and no detachment of United States troops would venture in to risk their necks. Naturally, the surrounding countryside was in one long state of war with the men from the badlands. It was from this constant war that one of the most spectacular gun battles of the west emerged. In fact, it is still recognized by an occasional celebration in Lewistown, the scene of its occurrence. The celebration is called "The shooting of Rattlesnake Jake."

"Rattlesnake Jake" Fallon and "Long-haired" Owens were two of the roughest of the badlands characters. They were known as notorious killers

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throughout the west, and were wanted in at least a half-dozen towns in as many territories. A posse of ranchers were watching every step these two made trying to get them with the goods. On Lewistown's Independence Day celebration, the outlaws decided to pull a raid on a horse herd while most people were in town celebrating. Before they went to work, however, they stopped off to have a couple of drinks. The posse had orders to wait until the men were out of town before causing any trouble, so they just trailed them from bar to bar. Rattlesnake and his friend were ready for almost any size war, each wearing two .44 Colt frontier model six-shooters plus a hunting knife in their belts and a Winchester under their arm. Leaving a saloon, the two men went to the race track where they bet, and lost heavily. Feeling meaner than usual, they crossed paths with a member of the celebration's parade dressed in the costume of Uncle Sam. For some reason, Owens didn't approve of this, so he slugged Uncle over the head with his six-gun. The both of them then made the wearer crawl around in the dirt at their feet. Soon tiring of this the two went back to the downtown district firing their guns in the air.

OPPOSITE a saloon, Jake and Owens suddenly took a dislike to an onlooker. Owens dismounted and with his gun in hand slowly started walking toward the stranger. The man, taking no chances, pulled a .22 revolver from his pocket and shot twice, wounding Owens in the stomach and hand. Owens, despite the wound, picked up his dropped gun and returned the fire. The man backed into a store which was full of men, and being in the line of fire these men promptly helped themselves to the stock of Winchesters and began shooting at Owens. Jake in the meantime was being peppered from another direction, though still in the saddle. When he saw Owens weaving toward him, Jake rode his horse through the hail of bullets, and there by his side dismounted and answered shot for shot. Now it was certain that both outlaws were fatally hurt, but they stood in the center of the street, with no shelter, calmly firing, reloading and firing. One of the riflemen commented, "They's so much lead in them that they can't tip over."

Two young men attempting to cross the street were dropped instantly by Jake, both with bullets in the head. Owens dropped his pistols and reached for his rifle. At that instant a bullet hit him in the head, and at the same time a slug tore into Jake's chest, and he too dropped. The townspeople then quit firing, but the two outlaws kept pulling their triggers as long as there was a breath in them, firing into the dirt. Admiring citizens surrounded the bodies and counted the wounds—nine in Rattlesnake Jake and eleven in Long-haired Owens. An inquest was held on the spot and the two were promptly buried, but even today, their legend lives on.

—JON BARRY

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